



The Muslim Understanding of Jesus

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ONE OF MY PRIZED POSSESSIONS IS A GREETING CARD WITH THE PICTURE OF AN open Qur'an on a Qur'an holder on a prayer rug. In the foreground are prayer beads; in the background is a mosque. Inside are the words, "May all the blessings of Christmas be yours." Our task is to discover in brief format how many of the blessings of Christmas and of the One there commemorated can be found in the expressions of Muslim piety pictured on this card.

The Jesus of the Qur'an reflects many of the characteristics of the communities that had found a home in the Arabian peninsula – from his name, 'Īsā (an apparent corruption of one used by the Syriac Christians), to his nature as prophet

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Jesus is an important figure in Islam. He is known as 'Īsā, and is frequently called the son of Mary, the Prophet, and the Messiah. The New Testament and Qur'anic descriptions, however, vary significantly. The Muslim understanding of Jesus takes us into the core area of Christian witness. The author carefully and objectively leads us through some of the main elements of the Muslim position.

but not divine (a view held by such Jewish Christian sects as the Ebionites and the Elkesaites).¹

I. HIS BIRTH

Another of my Christmas cards from Muslim friends contains the words, "We join you in commemorating the birth of Jesus Christ, Son of [the] Virgin Mary." Here Muslim and Christian piety do join more than in the other major commemorations of Christ's sojourn on earth, though some details echo apocryphal infancy gospels more than the canonical gospels.

The Qurānic Jesus, for example, speaks in the cradle and, reflecting *The Infancy Story of Thomas*,² forms birds out of clay and gives them life (Sūra 3:49/43; 5:110).³ In these accounts he also, as in the canonical accounts, heals the blind and the leper and raises the dead, but always with the permission of God.

II. HIS PASSION

The Qurānic witness to the passion of Jesus presents a problem to the reader. Sūra 4:157-58/156 appears to deny the crucifixion or that Jesus was the one crucified:

As for their claim that they killed the Messiah Jesus...they did not kill him, nor did they crucify him. It (or he) appeared so to them. There is a lot of doubt about this matter among those who are at odds over it. They have no real knowledge but follow only surmise. Assuredly, they did not kill him. On the contrary, God raised him to Himself.

Almost all Muslim commentators agree that this verse denies the crucifixion, but they differ as to what actually happened.

A common interpretation is that a substitute that was made to look like Jesus was crucified in his place. This has tantalizing parallels to ancient Gnostic views of a substitute who died in place of Jesus, or that his body was crucified while the true Jesus within did not suffer.⁴

The common conclusion of Muslims, as Kenneth Cragg summarizes it, is that historically Jesus did not die, theologically he need not die, and morally he should not die.⁵ Muslims—Sunnīs in particular—commonly claim that God would not and could not let such an act happen to the Prophet Jesus. Yet this is to restrict God.

What complicates the Qurānic account is other verses that speak of Jesus' death. In Sūra 19:33/34 Jesus says, "Peace be upon me the day I was born, the day I die, and the day of my being brought back alive." Zechariah invokes the same

¹M. P. Roncaglia, "Éléments Ebionites et Elkésaites dans le Coran," *Proche-Orient Chrétien* 21 (1971) 101-225.

²E. Hennecke, *New Testament Apocrypha*, 2 vols. (London: SCM, 1973) 1:392-393.

³Citations from the Qur'an will give the location in the Egyptian edition followed by that in the Fluegel edition, where these differ.

⁴Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* 1.24.4 (trans. *Ante-Nicene Christian Library* [Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1868] 5:91); J. M. Robinson, ed., *The Nag Hammadi Library in English* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1977) 245, 332, 334.

⁵Kenneth Cragg, *Jesus and the Muslim* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1985) 178.

blessing on John the Baptist in Sūra 19:15, certainly implying a real death and resurrection in each case. Since most Muslims interpret Sūra 4:157-59/156-57 as meaning Jesus was taken to heaven without a crucifixion, they expect him to come again and die before the final Resurrection Day – a scenario that is not at all clear in the Qur’ān.

In Sūra 3:55/48 God says to Jesus, “I am going to receive you (*mutawaffika*),” with death being the normal understanding of the words. This is followed by “and raise you to me,” using a form of the same verb used in Sūra 4:157/156 – making an ascension without death or a postponed resurrection a very unlikely interpretation. The verb used (*tawaffa*) is associated with death in the other 25 uses of it in the Qur’ān, three of them referring to Muhammad’s death. In 5:117 Jesus puts the verb in the past tense indicating that God had already received him – that is, caused him to die.

Some Muslim commentators include a real death of Jesus as one of the possible interpretations of Sūra 3:55/48. Thus al-Tabari (d. 923) refers to three ancient authorities that give this interpretation: Al-Rāzi (d. 1210) refers to Wahb b. Munabbih who said that Jesus was received (in death) for three hours before being raised; Ibn Ishāq who said the death was for seven hours; and Ibn Anas who said that God received him in death when he raised him to heaven. Al-Baydāwī (d. between 1284 and 1316) said that God caused Jesus to die for seven hours, then raised him to heaven, and said that Christians believed this. Finally, Ibn Kathir (d. 1373) added on the authority of Wahb b. Munabbih, “God caused him to die for three days, then resurrected him, then raised him.”⁶

Thus although 4:157 states the Jews did not crucify Jesus, the Qur’ān, based on 3:55/48, would seem to allow that God somehow caused him to die and raised him, despite the weight of Muslim interpretation to the contrary. One way of interpreting the Qur’ānic material has been to say that Jesus died, but only his body and not his soul. The Qur’ān used this kind of reasoning after the disastrous battle of Uhud with the words: “Say not of those who may be killed in the way of God that they are dead. Nay, they are alive, only you are not aware” (2:154/149). Jesus uses the same reasoning in the Gospel according to Matthew: “Be not afraid of those who kill the body but are not able to kill the soul” (10:28).

Another way of interpreting the Qur’ān would be to say that the Jews thought they had killed Jesus, but only God has ultimate power over life and death. The Qur’ān used similar reasoning after the victorious Battle of Badr when Muslims are cautioned with the words, “You did not kill them, but God killed them” (8:17). This would also fit the normal interpretation of Sūra 3:55/48 above, where God tells Jesus, “I am going to receive you.” In the biblical account Jesus

⁶ Abū Ja’far al-Tabari, *Commentaire du Coran*, abridged and trans. M. Pierre Godé (Paris, 1983-), part 3, 202-205; Fakhr al-Din al-Rāzi, *al-Tafsir al-Kabir* (Beirut: Dar al-Fikr, 1978) 2:457-458; Nāsir al-Din al-Baydāwī, *Anwār al-Tanzil wa-Asrār al-Ta’wil* (Beirut: Dar al-Jil, 1329 A.H.) 75; Abu al-Fidā Ibn Kathir, *Tafsir al-Qur’ān al-‘Azim* (Beirut: Dar al-Andalus, 1385 A.H.), 2:44 in Neal Robinson, *Christ in Islam and Christianity* (Albany: SUNY, 1991) 120-122.

reminds Pilate of the same ultimate source of life and death with the words, “You would have no power over me, unless it were given you from above” (John 19:11).

Even the traditional Muslim rejection of the crucifixion includes the intention of people to kill Jesus and his willingness to die. Therefore, the burden of interpretation for the Christian is to demonstrate what Christ accomplished through the crucifixion. Whereas the sinner crucified on his right had no opportunity to earn his salvation, Jesus by means of the cross assured him that he would that day be with him in paradise. Jesus, by accepting the crown of thorns with its reminder of the thorns involved in the original curse of sin, accepted what we deserved that we might wear the crown of life. Thus God’s power was shown not by raising Jesus before his work on the cross, as traditional Muslim interpretation would affirm. Rather, God demonstrated his power by raising Christ after his work was done on the cross.

III. HIS RETURN

It is not clear that the Qur’ān refers to Jesus’ return, though belief in it is widespread among Muslims. Two verses are commonly cited. After the denial that the Jews killed Jesus, Sūra 4:159/157 reads, “[There is] not [one] of the People of the Book except [he] will most certainly believe in him before his death, and on the Day of Resurrection he will be a witness against them.” The Arabic is not clear as to the one who will be believed in, before whose death it will occur, and who will be a witness against the Jews on the Day of Resurrection.

Among various Muslim interpretations of the text, al-Tabari favors that the People of the Book will believe in Jesus between his return and his death, when believers will unite under Islam. He then fills in the details that include Jesus descending, breaking the crucifixes, killing the pigs, and abolishing the poll tax. God will enable him to kill the Antichrist. Such security will come that lions will lie down with camels and wolves with sheep. Youths will play with snakes without being harmed. Then Jesus will tarry on earth, perhaps 40 years, before he dies.⁷ To this the traditionist al-Bukhāri adds that Jesus will come as a just judge.⁸ Since, however, Muslim commentators have generally believed he will die before the final resurrection, this is not understood as detracting from God as the final judge at the resurrection.

The other Qurānic verse commonly cited to support Jesus’ return is 43:61 which, between two passages about Jesus, states, “He (or it) is knowledge (*‘ilmun*)(or a sign – *‘alamun*) of the Hour.” The Arabic is not clear whether the subject is a person (hence, Jesus) or a thing (presumably the Qur’ān). Furthermore, the interpretation can be influenced by the variant readings *‘ilmun* or *‘alamun* which al-Tabari notes.⁹

Gog and Magog, the enemies of God who are mentioned in Ezekiel 38 and 39

⁷Al-Tabari, *Commentaire*, part 6, 14-17, in Robinson, *Christ in Islam*, 81.

⁸Al-Bukhāri, *Sahih al-Bukhari*, vol. 4, bk. 55, chap. 44, hadith 657.

⁹Al-Tabari, *Commentaire*, part 25, 54-55, in Robinson, *Christ in Islam*, 91.

and in the final battle of Satan and the church in Revelation 20:7, are also mentioned in the Qur'ān (18:94-98/93-98; 21:96), where they will surge forth to spoil the land. Al-Tabari notes that Jesus will petition God, who will cause them to die.¹⁰

The historian Ibn Khaldūn says that Jesus will descend at the white minaret east of Damascus, marry, have children, and die after 40 years.¹¹ Tradition identifies a minaret of the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus as the one where Jesus will descend. This used to be the Church of St. John and still bears the inscription in Greek: "Thy kingdom, O Christ, is an everlasting kingdom and Thy dominion endureth throughout all generations."

IV. MUSLIM REFLECTIONS

For the Muslim, christology is not included in theology; whereas for the Christian it is central to theology. Muslims honor Jesus as a prophet, but that makes the incarnation impossible. For the Christian, however, the ultimate form of prophethood is for the Word to be expressed in the flesh.

Although the Qur'ān denies the divine sonship of Jesus, it portrays an understanding of this in physical terms: "Our Lord...has not taken a consort or a son" (72:3). Yet elsewhere the Qur'ān uses the term *ibn* (one of the two Qur'ānic terms for "son") in a metaphorical sense, calling a traveler *ibn al-sabil* (a son of the road) (2:177/172, 215/211; 4:36/40). If Muslims understand that Christians use the term metaphorically, then they may be more open to exploring its meaning on the basis of those things on which we agree – his virgin birth and his obedience.

Since the Qur'ān portrays the human predicament as primarily ignorance rather than evil, as in the biblical analysis, the Muslim sees only the need of a guide, not a savior. Therefore, this biblical dimension of Christ is unnecessary in Muslim thought. In fact, only once does the Qur'ān use the word *najat* (salvation) (40:41/44).

Some modern Muslim writers have been using biblical materials to explore new dimensions of Jesus' life and teaching. The Egyptian Abas Mahmūd al-Aqqad is an example of such a genre in his *Abqariyyah al-Masih* ("The Genius of the Christ"), first published in Cairo in 1953. He starts by giving the biblical meaning of the title "Messiah" as the "anointed" rather than trying to find its meaning in an Arabic root like *masaha* ("pace through" – hence, "an ascetic wanderer") as has been done by Sūfis and other Muslim exegetes through the ages.

He is conversant with both the Old and New Testaments and traces Hebrew prophecies in Isaiah and Zechariah. Likewise, he quotes the gospel accounts freely to develop Christ's teaching even where it may differ from Islamic perspectives – on the centrality of love even for enemies, on changing from a materialistic to a spiritual perspective, on people's need for mercy and salvation, and on the realms of God and Caesar. The Sermon on the Mount and many parables are presented

¹⁰Al-Tabari, *Commentaire*, part 16, 23.

¹¹*The Muqaddimah*, trans. Franz Rosenthal (New York: Pantheon, 1958) 2:194.

literally. The Pharisee and the tax collector pray in the temple, and the tax collector is the one who “went home justified before God” – a theme so central to the gospel.

Although Jesus’ life is constructed primarily from biblical materials, al-Aqqad also adds some Qurānic content, such as the divine announcement to Zechariah concerning the coming birth of a son, John the Baptist.

Of special note is al-Aqqad’s unapologetic references to Jesus’ titles for himself – the light of the world, the bread of life, the true vine, the son of man, and the son of God. He goes on to trace the use of the term “son of God” from Genesis on – by Moses, by God to Pharaoh, by the psalmist, and by Jesus in his references to his Father, a term he taught his disciples to use. Thus instead of following the common practice of arguing against the titles “son of God” and heavenly “Father,” he says they need to be understood in their contemporary usage.

Al-Aqqad carries the biblical account to the overturning of the tables of the money changers in the temple courtyard, and there he says history stops and doctrine begins. Thus he, like other modern and contemporary Muslim writers of his genre, is unwilling to contradict the common Muslim understanding of Sūra 4:157-59/156-57, that it denies the gospel accounts of the crucifixion.

Thus we are left at the temple mount where the Muslim shrine, the Dome of the Rock, now stands. Its dome carries Qurānic descriptions of Jesus which modern Muslim authors like al-Aqqad have fleshed out from the events that took place in the surrounding countryside. This shrine is geographically so near, yet still separated from, the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, which local Christians call the Church of the Resurrection. So likewise is the thought and piety of those who worship there. ⊕