

“A spirit from Him”: Jesus in the Qur’an and Islamic Literature

A tradition survives from the days of Muhammed that illumines the enigmatic relationship between Jesus and the Prophet in the ethos of Islam. In 630 A.D. Muhammed’s army entered Mecca in triumph, ordering the destruction of all the idols and images associated with the Ka’bah. The story goes that as the Prophet searched through the Ka’bah, he came across a picture of the Virgin and Child. Muhammed quickly covered the picture with his cloak and demanded that all the other images be destroyed. Supposedly he did this as an act of “special reverence.”¹

How did the founder of Christianity come to be revered by the founder of Islam? The above legend is certainly not our only source in answering this question. The book Muhammed allegedly received from the angel Gabriel describes Jesus as a “Word from God” and “a spirit from Him.”² In fact, all Muslims since Muhammed have revered Jesus as a prophet because of the Qur’anic texts about him and the Islamic literature that venerates him. But who exactly is the Jesus of the Qur’an? And how does he differ from the Jesus of the gospels? An astonishing and unparalleled question in the history of religion is “how one world religion chose to adopt the central figure of another, coming to recognize him as constitutive of its own identity.”³ We will only scratch the surface of this intriguing question in our study. But we can learn much by examining texts from the Qur’an and other Islamic literature (including the recently compiled and translated

¹ Taken from *The Muslim Jesus* by Tarif Khalidi, p. 44. The tradition cited comes from Azraqi, *Akhbar Makka*, p. 111.

² *The Koran*, translated by N.J. Dawood. 3:39,45; 4:171.

³ Khalidi, p. 6.

“Muslim Gospel”). In doing so, we will get a clearer picture of the place Jesus has held in the Islamic consciousness.

Sources and Historical Context

From what sources and in what context did Muhammed obtain information about Jesus’s life and teachings? This is an important place to start in our study because it points up the root issue of revelation. One cannot miss the “finality” of Muhammed’s revelation in the Qur’an. The first surah after the “Exordium” rings out: “This book is not to be doubted.”⁴ The role of the Qur’an as related to previous revelation is made equally clear in surah 3:1—“He [God] has revealed to you the Book with the Truth, confirming the scriptures which preceded it; for He has already revealed the Torah and the Gospel for the guidance of mankind, and the distinction between right and wrong.”

So what did Muhammed know of the Torah and the Gospel? It should first be noted that at the time of Muhammed’s “ministry,” it is fairly certain that there was no Arabic translation of the Bible.⁵ Thus the Prophet’s exposure to the Bible had to come from other sources. It is well known that there were outpost Jewish and Christian communities in and around Medina at the time of Muhammed’s exile there in 622.⁶ Muhammed must have gained most of his knowledge of both Christianity and Judaism orally from these groups. However, many of these communities most likely did not represent creedal, orthodox Christianity.⁷ Muhammed found himself “amid many often

⁴ Surah 2:1

⁵ Khalidi, p. 21.

⁶ Tim Tennant, *Christianity at the Religious Roundtable: Evangelicalism in Conversation with Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam*. p. 174.

⁷ Tennant, p. 142. Tennant states, “The Christian settlements were quite diverse, including Nestorians, Monophysites, and other groups who were influenced by Christologies that lay outside the parameters of orthodoxy as articulated by the Council of Chalcedon in A.D. 451.”

mutually hostile Christian communities and not in the bosom of a universal church.”⁸

The same could be said of the Jewish communities, which represented a mixture of “scripture, lore, and myth.”⁹ The last item of note along these lines is that Christian Apocryphal writings “survived in active use among Eastern congregations well beyond their formal exclusion in the 4th and 5th centuries.”¹⁰ Thus, we may say that Muhammed received his knowledge of Jesus from a “living—not an imaginary—Christianity.”¹¹

These facts will be critical for our study because the Jesus Muhammed knew was in many respects *not* the Jesus of the Gospels. This point is actually affirmed by the Qur’an: written in the “eternal present,” the Qur’an “announces its intention to set the record straight, to retell and rehabilitate all past encounters between prophets and God.”¹² As we turn now to consider various texts, we should examine the Qur’anic/Islamic Jesus under three main categories. The primary category will inevitably be Christology, and (subsumed under this) we will also touch on Jesus’s status among the Qur’anic prophets and his role in the Qur’anic meta-narrative. In order to better organize the data that is spread randomly throughout the Islamic literature, we will observe what is said about Christ’s birth, life, death, and resurrection.

The Birth of Jesus

Surprisingly, like the gospel of Luke, the Qur’an has both an annunciation and a birth narrative. The story begins with the birth of Mary, who is dedicated to the service of the Lord (3:35). She is raised by Zechariah, who is visited by angels who tell him to “rejoice in the birth of John, who shall confirm the Word of God. He shall be princely

⁸ Khalidi, p. 7.

⁹ Ibid., p. 7.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 9.

¹¹ Khalidi, p. 9.

¹² Ibid., p. 10.

and chaste, a prophet and a righteous man” (3:39). Angels then announce to Mary: “God bids you rejoice in a Word from Him. His name is the Messiah, Jesus son of Mary” (3:44). Jesus will be “noble in this world,” and “one of those who are favored.” He will “preach to men in his cradle and in the prime of manhood, and shall lead a righteous life.”

This preaching “from the cradle” is later recorded in 19:29ff when the baby Jesus confounds a group of Jews who were calling the virgin birth into question, giving them a short sermon on the truth of his mission! The virgin birth itself is recorded in 19:15ff, as a spirit appears to Mary in the form of a man. He tells her that Jesus will be “a holy son,” “a sign to mankind,” and “a blessing from Ourselves.” Later in 21:91, we find echoes of Adam’s creation: “We breathed into her of Our spirit, and made her and her son a sign to all mankind.” In the “Muslim Gospel,” Mary is said to have conversed with Jesus even while he was still in her womb: “I would hear Jesus praising God inside me. Whenever I was alone and there was no one with me, I would converse with him and he with me, while he was still in my womb.”¹³

Christology

The birth narratives of Jesus in the Islamic literature are striking considering that there are no parallel narratives for Muhammed. Qur’anic scholars have debated the meaning of these passages over the centuries. Concerning the incarnation by “Our Spirit,” there are two main currents of interpretation. Some commentators state unequivocally that this is not God, but a spirit sent from Him, probably the angel Gabriel.¹⁴ Others understand the “full-grown man” (the manifestation of “Our spirit”) as

¹³ Khalidi, p. 195.

¹⁴ Neil Robinson, *Christ in Islam and Christianity*, p. 161.

Jesus himself, who then enters Mary's womb.¹⁵ Thus, in contrast to Luke 1:35, the purpose of the birth narratives in the Qur'an and Islamic literature is not to evidence Jesus's divinity. One can see how the Lukan narrative has been garbled in the Qur'anic account—in the Luke account, a spirit from God (Gabriel, etc.) *did* appear to Mary, but only to announce the blessed work of the Holy Spirit in her womb.

Jesus among the Qur'anic Prophets

Jesus and Mary are almost always placed together in the Islamic literature. The phrase, "Jesus, Son of Mary" appears sixteen times in the Qur'an. This is important because Muhammad was apparently exposed to a heretical stream of Christianity which held that the Trinity was made up of Jesus, Mary, and God: "Then God will say: 'Jesus, Son of Mary, did you ever say to mankind: 'Worship me and my mother as gods besides God?'" 'Glory be to you,' he will answer, 'I could never have claimed what I have no right to'" (5:114ff). There are interesting parallels between Mary and A'isha, Muhammed's virgin bride: both are accused of sexual immorality and both are vindicated by a revelation from God.¹⁶

The Role of Jesus in the Qur'anic Meta-narrative

The "spirit"-generated virgin birth makes Jesus a unique figure in the Qur'an and Islamic literature. Both Jesus and Mary are "signs to all mankind" (21:91), but Muhammed goes to great lengths to establish Jesus and Mary's *humanity* (see esp. 3:59, 78ff; 5:75, 114ff) and their role as *signs that point to the last Prophet* (see esp. 61:6ff). Yet Muhammed attributes the biblical title "Messiah" to Jesus, likely missing the richness of the Old Testament meaning of the word—"anointed one" or "king." Jesus is

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 161.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 159ff.

the penultimate of the six great Qur'anic prophets: Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and Muhammed. "The last three have this in common: each brought a law that was put into writing in a book."¹⁷

The Life of Jesus

Rather than providing an exhaustive list of Qur'anic and "Muslim Gospel" references to the life and work of Jesus, let us consider one major passage from the Qur'an and a saying from the "Muslim Gospel." Surah 3:48ff reads:

He [God] will instruct him [Jesus] in the Scriptures and in wisdom, in the Torah and in the Gospel, and send him forth as an apostle to the Israelites. He will say: "I bring you a sign from your Lord. From clay I will make for you the likeness of a bird. I shall breathe into it and, by God's leave, it shall become a living bird. By God's leave I shall heal the blind man and the leper, and raise the dead to life. I shall tell you what to eat and what to store up in your houses. Surely that will be a sign for you, if you are true believers. I come to confirm the Torah which preceded me and to make lawful for you some of the things you are forbidden. I bring you a sign from your Lord: therefore fear God and obey me. God is my Lord and your Lord: therefore serve Him. That is a straight path (cf. 5:110).

This saying from the "Muslim Gospel" is also noteworthy as we consider the question of Jesus's divinity in the Islamic life of Jesus:

Gabriel met Jesus and said to him, "Peace be upon you, Spirit of God." And upon you peace, Spirit of God," said Jesus. Then Jesus asked, "O Gabriel, when will the Hour come?" Gabriel's wings fluttered and he replied, "The questioned knows no more about this than the questioner. It has grown heavy in the heavens

¹⁷ Chawkat Moucarry, *The Prophet and the Messiah*, p. 175.

and the earth; it will only come upon you suddenly.” Or else he said, “Only God will reveal it when it is time.”¹⁸

Christology

In the above passage from the Qur’an (3:48ff), we find an echo of many New and Old Testament passages. Particularly interesting in light of the above surahs are Deuteronomy 18:15 and Matthew 17:5. In Deuteronomy 18, Moses promised that God would send a prophet like him from among Israel. He commanded the people, “It is to him you must listen.” In Matthew 17 we find the fulfillment of the Mosaic promise in God’s pronouncement upon His Son, Jesus: “Listen to him!” Surah 3:48ff follows the same line of thought—Jesus has come to “confirm the Torah which preceded [him] and to make lawful for you some of the things you are forbidden.” This is an echo of the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5), in which Jesus, like Moses, goes up on a mountain to give the law. But unlike the statement in surah 3:48ff, Jesus actually intensifies the commands of the Torah with his “you have heard it said” sayings.

The “clay bird” verses have intrigued many Qur’anic scholars over the years. The source of this legend comes from an apocryphal writing called *The Infancy Story of Thomas*.¹⁹ The biographer of Muhammed, Ibn Ishaq, records the following in a report on the beliefs of a group of Christians who sent an embassy to Muhammed at Medina: “They argue that he is God because he used to raise the dead, and heal the sick, and declare the unseen; and make clay birds and then breathe into them that they flew away; and all this was by the command of God Almighty.”²⁰ Based on this report, it seems strange that Muhammed included surah 3:48ff in the Qur’an. However, on closer

¹⁸ Khalidi, p. 53-4.

¹⁹ Robinson, p. 143.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 144.

inspection, although the Qur'an "does not deny that Jesus performed the miracles which the Christians attributed to him," "it puts them in perspective by stressing that they were performed "by God's leave," that is to say, they are not proofs of his divinity."²¹

The parallel passage to the one cited above (surah 5:110) adds that God "strengthened [Jesus] with the Holy Spirit." If we place this statement beside 3:48ff's "By God's leave I shall heal the blind man and the leper, and raise the dead to life," we find an echo of Luke 7:22 (in which Jesus alludes to Isaiah 29:18, 35:5, and 61:1).

Jesus among the Qur'anic Prophets

The objection many Muslims have against Christians is that they recognize all of God's prophets except for Muhammed. Muslims, on the other hand, accept Jesus as well as the great prophets of the Old Testament. Chawkat Moucarray gives a helpful corrective to this common Muslim objection:

It suggests that Muslims believe in Jesus the way Christians do, which of course is not the case. Jesus is certainly seen as one of the greatest prophets of Islam and is revered by all Muslims; but for Christians...Jesus is much more than a great prophet. He is *the* Prophet. Not only did he *preach* the word of God; he is *himself* the eternal Word of God.²²

The Role of Jesus in the Qur'anic Meta-narrative

Though we might have considered the saying from the "Muslim Gospel" (the interchange between Gabriel and Jesus) under "Christology," we examine it here because it provides a clear statement consonant with the Qur'anic teaching on Jesus's place in the history of God's dealings with His people. We should say first that Jesus is pictured here

²¹ Ibid., p. 144.

²² Moucarray, p. 219.

as a mere man—he does not consider Gabriel’s greeting “Peace upon you, Spirit of God” a recognition of his divinity. He shows this by giving Gabriel an identical greeting and by questioning God’s angel concerning “the Hour.” This is certainly an allusion to Jesus’s statement in Matthew 24:36, in which he says that no one knows the hour of the Last Day, not even the Son. As opposed to the Matthew text, the Jesus of the “Muslim Gospel” saying (and of the Qur’an) is a *mere man* who *will play a part in the Last Hour*, though he knows not when that Hour will come.

The Death and Resurrection of Jesus

This group of Qur’anic texts in particular evidence quite clearly that Jesus is “the only prophet in the Qur’an who is deliberately made to distance himself from the doctrines that his community is said to hold of him.”²³ These are some of the hardest and most mysterious sayings in the Qur’an; they show the great pains Muhammed took to vindicate the Jesus of the Gospels from the shame of the cross. Surah 4:157 is the most important Qur’anic text about Jesus’s “death” and “resurrection,”²⁴ and it is representative of the Qur’anic teaching on these two subjects:

They denied the truth and uttered a monstrous falsehood against Mary. They declared: “We have put to death the Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, the apostle of God.” They did not kill him, nor did they crucify him, but they thought they did.²⁵ Those that disagreed about him were in doubt concerning him; they knew nothing about him that was not sheer conjecture; they did not slay him for certain. God lifted him up to Him; God is mighty and wise. There is none among the

²³ Khalidi, p. 12.

²⁴ These two words are placed in quotations because the Biblical meaning of these terms should not be equated with their Qur’anic meaning.

²⁵ Dawood’s footnote reads: “Or, literally, ‘he was made to resemble another for them.’”

People of the Book but will believe in him before his death; and on the Day of Resurrection he will bear witness against them.

Christology

Surah 4:157 is arguably the most important text for Qur'anic Christology. Ironically, it venerates Jesus as one of the great prophets of Islam even as it destroys the Christian doctrine of the atonement, effectively damning everyone on earth to hell (according to biblical concept of salvation). Without the crucifixion, there is no sacrifice for sin, no propitiation of God's wrath, no justification of sinners, and obviously, no resurrection as the Bible understands that word. So as we discuss what the Qur'an says about Jesus's death and resurrection, we should keep in mind that this surah is saying that Jesus has *not died yet* and that Christians will ultimately be judged for their gross mishandling of the record of Jesus's death.

Muhammed's explanation of what "really happened" at the cross smacks of the early Christian heresy of Docetism, in which Jesus only "seemed" to be a man (thus he did not really die on the cross among other things). Various explanations of these verses are given by Muslim commentators, but most recognize that there are problems in the text that must be dealt with. For example, is there a way to explain how these verses do not make God into a deceiver? In effect, because the Qur'an here says that Christians will be judged by Christ himself for their mishandling of what actually happened at the cross, Muhammed is saying that they will be judged for *being deceived by what was in fact an illusion!*²⁶

Other Qur'anic texts (esp. 3:55) speak about God "lifting" Jesus up to Him. Again, there are different strands of interpretation, but most Islamic scholars believe that

²⁶ Moucarry, p. 138.

Jesus was simply taken up to God (like Enoch) before he “seemed” to die on the cross.²⁷ So again, Jesus has not died yet, and he will return one day (the Day of Resurrection) to, as it were, set the record straight and judge those who are not true Muslims. These will be his “mature years” (3:46), after which he will finally die.

Jesus among the Qur’anic Prophets

A pertinent question for our topic is this: “Why was it essentially impossible for Muhammed (and subsequent Muslims) to believe that Jesus died on the cross (and by extension, resurrected)?” Moucarry gives two helpful answers. First, “God is faithful to His messengers” (see 22:40; 40:51).²⁸ Because of this unassailable fact, God would not leave Jesus, one of His greatest prophets, to die a shameful and horrific death like the crucifixion. And second, “God is invincible.” Thus, “Had Jesus been crucified, God himself would have been defeated.”²⁹ These two truths are very helpful for Christians to keep in mind as they talk to Muslims about the death of Christ for sin. Most Muslims simply do not have a category for such talk about one of God’s great prophets. In fact, for Muslims, the Christian teaching about Jesus’s death on the cross is proof of its own falsehood, for God would never abandon His prophets to such a death. So to draw one conclusion from all this, the Qur’an teaches that there is no need for a sacrifice on behalf of sinners. Thus, sin, though a problem for men, is not problematic enough to necessitate a penal substitutionary atonement by God.

²⁷ Some scholars say another man died on the cross in Jesus’s place, but this and other explanations do not hold water considering the record of the gospels.

²⁸ Moucarry, p.140.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 140.

The Role of Jesus in the Qur'anic Meta-narrative

This is a fitting place to end our study because this topic deals with The End of all things according to the Qur'an. The Qur'an teaches (in the above passage as well as in other texts, including several Hadiths) that Jesus's return (and subsequent death) will be *the sign* of the Last Hour.³⁰ Thus, at the end of time, all Christians will be corrected in their beliefs about Jesus and will see that the Qur'anic understanding of him was the right one. Jesus will live out the rest of his days, die, and be buried next to the grave of Muhammed. His death will signal the final resurrection.³¹

A man buried beside a man: here lies the extent and end of Islamic redemption. We must therefore use the term "meta-narrative" because (as the above section shows) there is no concept of "redemptive history" in the Qur'an. True, all Muslims will live eternally in a peaceful garden, but they will all have earned their spot in paradise, having no need of the blood of Christ.

Conclusion

Our study has shown that Jesus holds a strange and unique place in the Islamic consciousness. Even though he is revered as a great prophet (he is called a "spirit from Him"), he is not God, nor did he ever claim to be God. The Jesus of the Qur'an is a *man* sent by God to play a role in the larger metanarrative of Islam, ultimately pointing to the last great Prophet, Muhammed. His birth was unique; his life was prophetic and "Spirit"-inspired; his death was a mystery; and his second return will be an inevitable event marking the last age of history.

³⁰ Again, this is according to one strand of interpretation. Others exist as well.

³¹ Moucarry, p. 139.

Because the dialogue between Christians and Muslims has (of late) increased dramatically, often with violence as the catalyst, it is essential that Christians have a good working knowledge of Islamic understandings of Christ. For example, something that did not come out in our study is the Muslim reaction to the biblical title for Jesus, “Son of God.” This subject takes us back to the story that began our study. When Muhammed entered Mecca and ordered the destruction of idols, he was taking a stand against the popular idea that God had a consort (a wife) and so had sons and daughters.³² This idea was one of the main reasons why idolatry had become rampant among the people of Mecca (and India at large). It is easy, then, to understand why the Qur’an (and a good Muslim who submits to its authority) denounces again and again the idea that God could ever have a son.

From this example alone we can see how tough it is for a Muslim to embrace Christ savingly. As we do cross-cultural ministry among Muslims, we should be extremely sensitive to their concerns and questions. Hopefully this study has been helpful to that end. Jesus said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life.” Our prayer then must be: “May the kingdom of God advance in the Muslim world so that many will know the grace and true rest of Christ, the only Redeemer.”

³² See Moucarry’s discussion on this topic, p. 184ff.

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