

*“A Sign for All People:”  
Jesus in the Qur’an and Islamic  
Tradition*

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According to classical Muslim accounts, two years after the Prophet Muhammad began to publicly preach the worship of the one God to the people of Mecca, Muslims were enduring such hardships and persecutions at the hands of the (polytheistic) Quryash, Mecca's principal tribe, that Muhammad encouraged them to flee to Abyssinia and seek refuge with the Christian king (*Negus*) of Abyssinia. When the Negus asked the Muslim refugees what was the revelation that had been given to them, Ja'far, the designated spokesman of the group, repeated for him verses of the Qur'an that had been revealed to Muhammad shortly before their departure:

Recall in the Book (the story of) Mary, when she withdrew from her people to an eastern place. And she screened herself off from them. Then We sent to her Our Spirit which appeared to her as a real man. She said: "I take refuge from you in the Most Merciful, if you are God-fearing." He said: "I am a messenger of your Lord (to announce): 'I will give to you a pure son.'" She said: "How can I have a son when no man has touched me, and I have not been unchaste?" He said: "So be it. Your Lord says: 'It is easy for Me, so We will make him a sign for humanity and a Mercy from Us. It is thus a matter decreed.'" (*Surat Maryam* 19.16-21)<sup>1</sup>

Undoubtedly impressed by the similarity of these words to the annunciation as related in Luke's Gospel, the Negus granted them asylum. The Quryash, however, had pursued the Muslims to Abyssinia and accused them before the Negus of spreading lies about Jesus. When the Negus asked the Muslims what it was that they said about Jesus, Ja'far answered: "We say of him what our Prophet has taught us: he [Jesus] is God's servant, His messenger, His Spirit and His Word that He has breathed into Mary, the Holy Virgin."<sup>2</sup> Picking up a small stick from the ground, the Negus said to Ja'far that the difference between what the Muslims and the Christians believed about Jesus did not exceed the length of the stick. Their safety in his realm was thus assured while the Quraysh were dismissed. For all the polemics Christian authors would write against Islam in subsequent centuries, it is ironic that it was specifically Islamic Christology that had saved the early Muslim community from annihilation. This article provides a brief overview to Islamic *Christology* as found in the Qur'an and Islamic tradition.<sup>3</sup>

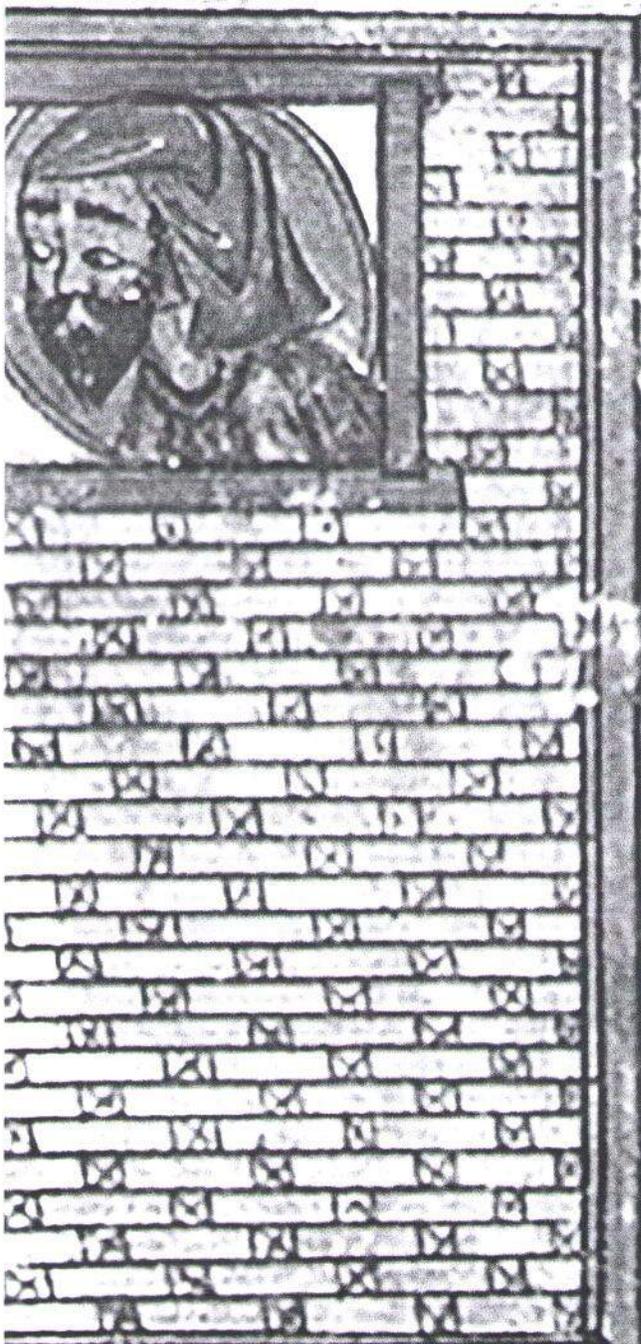
Islam's foundational principle of the oneness of God (*tawhid*) does not allow for an *incarnation* such as described in the Christian tradition—i.e. God's divinity cannot be "shared" (*sharika*) by anyone, and thus God cannot have a "son" in a literal sense. Yet, as Muslim scholar Mahmoud Ayoub has observed: Islam "denies the divinity of Christ, but without denying his special humanity."<sup>4</sup> Islam holds that

1. My translations from the Qur'an are based on those in 'Abdullah Yusuf 'Ali's *The Meaning of the Glorious Qur'an*, 10<sup>th</sup> ed. (Beltsville: Amana, 1999).

2 As related by Tariq Ramadan in: *In the Footsteps of the Prophet* (Oxford: University Press, 2007), 61. Cf. Martin Lings, *Muhammad: His Life Based on the Earliest Sources*, 2nd ed. (Rochester: Inner Traditions, 2006), 86.

3 The literature on Jesus in Islam is quite vast. For an extensive bibliography, see: Oddbjørn Leirvik, *Images of Jesus Christ in Islam*, 2nd ed. (London: Continuum, 2010), 271-285, and more recent works cited in this article.

4 Mahmoud Ayoub, "Toward an Islamic Christology II: the death of Jesus, Reality or Delusion – a Study of the Death of Jesus in Tafsir Literature," in: *A Muslim View of Christianity: Essays on Dialogue by Mahmoud Ayoub*, Irfan A. Omar, ed. (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2007), 159.



God communicates His will to humanity by means of exceptional individuals who are designated prophets (Ar. sing., *nabi*). Some of these prophets are also called “messengers” (sing., *rasūl*) because they are the bearers of a new revelation or represent a significant change within an existing faith community. Jesus (or *ʿĪsā* as he is called in the Qur’an) is such a messenger, bearing the Gospel (*Injil*) to his people as Moses had borne the Torah, and Muhammad the Qur’an.

In the Qur’an, Jesus is referred to some twenty-five times, most frequently as “Jesus, son of Mary” (*ʿĪsā ibn Maryam*). Although Jesus is not alone in being called God’s prophet (19.30), messenger (3.49), and servant (19.30), as well as “one of those nearest to God” (3.45), he does bear other distinctions that are entirely unique to him. Frequently in the Qur’an, the name of Jesus is prefaced with *al-Masīh*—“the Messiah” (Gr. *Christos*), although the precise significance of this term in the Qur’an goes unexplained. Some Arabic lexicographers have explained that, like the Hebrew term, it signifies Jesus being anointed as prophet, or that he was “anointed” with God’s blessing (19:31). Others held that *masīh* signified Jesus as the one who touches because he laid hands on the sick and healed them.<sup>5</sup> Indeed the Qur’an does refer to Jesus’ miracles of healing the blind and the leper, and raising the dead (5.110).<sup>6</sup> Jesus is also uniquely called God’s Word (or a “Word from God”) in the Qur’an (3.45, 4.171). This does not mean, however, that Jesus is understood as the pre-existent *Logos* of John’s Gospel, but rather the “Word” signifies the manner in which he was brought into existence in Mary’s womb—i.e. through God’s creative utterance ‘Be!’ (3.47). The Qur’an thus draws a parallel between Jesus and *Adam* since both were brought to life through God’s command (3.59). Jesus is also referred to as “a spirit” (*rūh*) from God (4.171). Like *masīh*, this distinction goes without explanation, and the phrase has given rise to much discussion and debate; but like “God’s Word” it seems to point to Jesus’ conception through God’s direct action without the agency of a human father:<sup>7</sup> “We breathed into her (Mary) of Our Spirit, and We made her and her son a Sign for all people.” (21.91). The Qur’an also speaks of Jesus being “strengthened with the Holy Spirit” (2.87, 2.253, 5.110) which is evocative of Jesus’ baptism as related in Matt. 3.16/Luke 3.22. Jesus’ mission as given in the Qur’an is a simple one:

I have come to you with wisdom and to make clear to you some matters about which you differ. So be conscious of God (*ataqū*) and follow me, for God is my Lord and your Lord. So serve Him; this is a straight path. (43.63-64)

Perhaps the greatest difference in what Christians and Muslims believe about Jesus concerns the Crucifixion. It is only mentioned once in the Qur’an among all the references to Jesus, but

not within the context of Jesus’ life and mission. The reference appears in a section of the fourth *sūra* (*al-Nisā*), which recounts the disobedience of the Israelites at Sinai, their betrayal of the Covenant, their rejection of God’s prophets, and their accusations (of adultery) against Mary. The text continues:

They said: ‘We killed Christ Jesus, the son of Mary, the messenger of God. But they did not kill him, nor did they crucify him but it was made to appear to them... They did not kill him, for God raised him to Himself, and God is All-Mighty and All-Wise. (4.157-8)

Although these verses are somewhat ambiguous from a grammatical and syntactical perspective, over the centuries the majority of Muslim exegetes have understood them quite literally, i.e. that Jesus did not die on the Cross but was raised bodily to heaven by God,<sup>8</sup> with perhaps someone else crucified in his place. Others, including a group of Ismā’ili-Shi’i philosophers of the tenth-eleventh centuries CE known as the *Ikhwān al-Safā*’ (“The Brethren of Purity”), the philosopher and mystic Abū Hāmid al-Ghazzālī (1058-1111), as well as some modern Muslim scholars have rejected this interpretation.<sup>9</sup> Instead of denying the actual historical crucifixion of Jesus, they understand the verses to signify, as Mahmoud Ayoub suggests, “a denial of the power of human beings to vanquish and destroy the divine Word, which is forever victorious.”<sup>10</sup> That is, Jesus—God’s Messenger, Spirit and Word—was not defeated in death but lives eternally. The verses, Ayoub says “constitute an accusation or judgment against the human sin of pride and ignorance,”<sup>11</sup> the very charges levied against the Children of Israel in the preceding and subsequent verses.

Although in Islam Jesus does not have a “salvific” role in the Christian sense of an expiatory sacrifice on the Cross for the sins of humanity, in the opinion of many Muslims theologians and exegetes, Jesus does have an *eschatological* role. This is based on the interpretation of 43.61 in the Qur’an: “And he will be a sign for the Hour. Therefore have no doubt about it and follow me. This is the straight path.” Many understand these words to refer to Jesus’ return in the End Time when he will defeat the Anti-Christ (*al-Dajjāl*) and establish peace and justice on the earth.<sup>12</sup> Many believe that Jesus’ descent from the heavens will occur in Damascus. To this day, the southwest minaret in the Umayyad Mosque is called the “Jesus minaret” as it is regarded as the precise location of his return (ill.).

In addition to the references to Jesus in the Qur’an, there are several hundred sayings attributed to him and stories about him, many of which find parallels in biblical and extra-biblical sources.<sup>13</sup>

8 Both Christians and Muslims regard the Chapel of the Ascension on the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem as the place from which Jesus was raised to heaven.

9 For a complete discussion of this issue, see Todd Lawson’s *The Crucifixion and the Qur’an: a Study in the History of Muslim Thought* (Oxford: OneWorld, 2009). For a more extensive study of the *Ikhwān al-Safā*’, see Ian R. Netton’s *Muslim Neoplatonists: an Introduction to the Thought of the Brethren of Purity* (London: Routledge, 2003).

10 Ayoub, “Toward an Islamic Christology II: the death of Jesus, Reality or Delusion – a Study of the Death of Jesus in *Tafsīr* Literature,” in: *A Muslim View of Christianity: Essays on Dialogue by Mahmoud Ayoub*, 176.

11 *Ibid.* 177.

12 For a complete treatment of Jesus’ eschatological role in Islam, see Zeki Saritoprak’s *Islam’s Jesus* (Gainesville: University of Florida, 2014).

13 *The Muslim Jesus: Sayings and Stories in Islamic Literature*, Tarif Khalidi, ed. and trans. (Cambridge: Harvard, 2001).

5 Robinson, Neal. “Jesus.” *Encyclopaedia of the Qur’an*. General Editor: Jane Dammen McAuliffe, Georgetown University, Washington DC. Brill Online, 2015. Reference. Georgetown University. 13 March 2015 <[http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-the-quran/jesus-EQCOM\\_00099](http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-the-quran/jesus-EQCOM_00099)>

6 Many more miracles attributed to Jesus are described in the *ahadīth*, literary texts (e.g. “The Stories of the Prophets”) and histories such as al-Tabarī’s *Tārīkh al-rusul wa’l-mulūk*. For an English translation, see: *The History of al-Tabarī: Volume IV: the Ancient Kingdoms*, Moshe Perlmann, trans. (Albany: State University of New York, 1987), 112-125.

7 al-Zamakshari, *al-Kashshāf* (Bayrūt: Dār al-Kitāb al-‘Arabī, 2008), v.1, 456; Mahmoud Ayoub, “Jesus the Son of God: a Study of the Terms *Ibn* and *Walad* in the Qur’an and *Tafsīr* Tradition,” in: *A Muslim View of Christianity: Essays on Dialogue by Mahmoud Ayoub*, 129.

Mention must also be made of the *sūfis*, the mystics of the Islamic tradition who hold Jesus in particular esteem as a paragon of holy wisdom, spiritual poverty and purity.<sup>14</sup> The great *sūfi* Shaykh Ibn al-‘Arabī (1165-1240 CE) wrote: “I have had many meetings with him in vision, and at his hands I turned (to God)...He ordered me to practice renunciation and detachment.”<sup>15</sup> In words that echo those of St. Francis in his conclusion to the Letter to the Faithful,<sup>16</sup> the great Persian *sūfi* Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī (1207-1273 CE) wrote: “The body is like Mary. Every one of us has a Jesus within him, but until the pangs manifest in us our Jesus is not born.”<sup>17</sup>

Christ Jesus, son of the Virgin Mary, God’s Prophet, Messenger and Servant; God’s Word and Spirit, God’s Mercy, who healed the sick and the blind, and raised the dead; the one raised by God and the one who will come again; the spiritual guide of mystics and contemplatives. A Sign for all people. Peace be upon him.

14 Javad Nurbakhsh, *Jesus in the Eyes of the Sufis*, Terry Graham et al. trans. (London: Nimatullahi, 1983).

15 Stephen Hirtenstein, *The Unlimited Mercifier: the Spiritual Life and Thought of Ibn ‘Arabī* (Oxford: Anqa, 1999), 53.

16 “We are... [Jesus’] mothers when we carry Him in our heart and body through love and a pure and sincere conscience; and give Him birth through a holy activity, which must shine before others by example.” [http://www.vatican.va/spirit/documents/spirit\\_20020203\\_lettera-fedeli-2\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/spirit/documents/spirit_20020203_lettera-fedeli-2_en.html)

17 John Renard, *All the King’s Falcons: Rumi on Prophets and Revelation* (Albany: SUNY, 1994), 95.



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*Cover photo:* Isaiah’s Vision (21.7) of Jesus riding a donkey and Muhammad riding a camel al-Biruni, al-Athhar al-Baqiyya ‘an al-Qurun al-Khaliyya (Chronology of Ancient Nations), Ottoman lands, ca. 1560. (Bibliothèque nationale de France).



The Umayyad Mosque in Damascus and the so-called “Jesus minaret,” which some Muslims claim marks the location of Jesus’ return to earth in the End Time. Photo by *Michael Calabria*