



# **Jesus:** A Foundation for Dialogue Between Muslims and Christians

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*In the name of Allah, the Gracious, the Merciful*

## Abstract

Jesus Christ, the Messiah, is the central focus of Christianity, the largest religious group in the world. Jesus عليه السلام (upon him be peace) is also considered a prophet in Islam and one of the great messengers of Allah. Common ground between Muslims and Christians can be built upon shared themes in the theological, moral, and narrative elements of Jesus' life. This article outlines these significant elements: love for God and neighbor; the roles of Zechariah, John the Baptist, and the Virgin Mary عليهم السلام; the unique designation of Messiah; the final moments of Jesus' life; and his return before the end of time. The aim is to give Muslims a knowledge base from which to dialogue effectively with Christians. At the same time, this article highlights important areas of disagreement between Islam and Christianity regarding doctrines of salvation and Jesus' divinity.

## Introduction

Jesus Christ, the Messiah and son of Mary, is a highly revered figure in Islam. He is a great prophet and messenger of Allah, one of the five major prophets (*ulul' al- 'azm*) including Noah, Abraham, Moses, and Muhammad, peace be upon them all. Allah encouraged Prophet Muhammad عليه السلام in the Qur'an to take inspiration from the stories of these prophets as he suffered persecution for his faith, "Be patient like those of resolve among the messengers."<sup>1</sup> Jesus, specifically, is mentioned by name twenty-five times in the Qur'an, within long passages detailing his story, his teachings, his miracles, and their enduring theological and moral lessons for us.

Not unlike the current experience of many Muslims around the world, Jesus عليه السلام came into the world at a time of great turbulence, religious corruption, and violence. The Romans were occupying the capital of Jerusalem and the area

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<sup>1</sup> The Qur'an, Sūrat al-Ahqāf 46:35.

surrounding its Temple, the teachers of the religious law were influenced by power and politics, and the Zealots were waging a bloody campaign of insurrection against the foreign invaders. In this time of crisis, many Jews hoped that the foretold Messiah would be sent to liberate them from oppression and restore the earthly kingdom of David عليه السلام. But when the Messiah was revealed to the world, he did not come with a military mission. Jesus began to preach the oneness of the God of Abraham عليه السلام, fulfillment of the law, compassion for friend and enemy alike, and to look for the kingdom of heaven inside themselves:

*Once Jesus was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God was coming, and he answered, ‘The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; nor will they say, ‘Look, here it is!’ or ‘There it is!’ For, in fact, the kingdom of God is within you.’<sup>2</sup>*

The restoration of the true faith would not be achieved by the fire and fury of swords, armies, and chariots. Instead, the kingdom of heaven was accessible to every human being; it was already here, right now, inside your soul just waiting to be awakened for discussion.

The story of Jesus عليه السلام within his social context has much to teach Muslims in a similar situation, as every prophet tended to emphasize what people needed to hear most in their moment. Moses عليه السلام carried out his mission in a time of great lawlessness after the Exodus, as the Israelites had only recently escaped the rule of Pharaoh, so the revelations of the Torah focused on delivering the law (outward teachings) even though it still contained the spirit (inward teachings). When Jesus عليه السلام came, the custodians of the law were fraudulent and unethical, cheating honest pilgrims in the very courtyard of the Temple; though they were masters of the outward law, they were flagrant violators of its spirit.<sup>3</sup> Thus, the Gospel of Jesus focused more on inward spirituality and ethics, which should complement and fulfill the outward law. If Muslims become too harsh, extreme, and

<sup>2</sup> Luke 17:20-21; Michael D. Coogan, Marc Z. Brettler, Carol A. Newsom, and Pheme Perkins, *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: With the Apocrypha* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 1863.

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 23:1-36.

hard-hearted in their adherence to the outward law, they should be reminded of the law's inner spirit, just as Jesus عليه السلام taught to his people.

There are several elements of the life and teachings of Jesus عليه السلام in Islam that form a basis for mutual respect with Christians (and all human beings, for that matter): his message of love for God and love for our neighbors, his bearing of the Gospel, his blessed mother عليها السلام and the miraculous virgin birth, his unique designation as the Messiah, his penetrating wisdom, his signs and wonders, his ascension to heaven, and his eventual return to restore the true religion once again. At the same time, there are substantial differences between Islam and traditional Christian theology. Common ground helps us set the tone for a fruitful discussion on the meaning of Jesus عليه السلام to us, yet conflicting truth claims about salvation will always exist between Muslims and Christians until the Day that Allah judges between us. These truth claims need to be addressed, not sidestepped, but only in a respectful dialogue that honors how much we already have in common.

## Common Ground: Love God, Love Your Neighbor

When discussing Islam with people of other religions or ideologies, it is best to establish a common set of facts, principles, and values—what social psychologists call a “shared reality”—that can form the basis of a dialogue.<sup>4</sup> An aggressive, proselytizing approach, which focuses on differences to the exclusion of commonalities, might win over some converts but will more likely alienate the majority, if not provoke outright hostility.

In regards to Judaism and Christianity, the unmistakable message in the Qur'an is that Prophet Muhammad ﷺ was sent to confirm the messages of previous prophets, including Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, and Jesus, peace be upon them all, as well as previous scriptures such as the Torah, the Psalms, and the Gospel in their original, unchanged form.

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<sup>4</sup> Gerald Echterhoff, "Shared-Reality Theory." In *Handbook of Theories of Social Psychology*: Volume 2, 180-199. London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2012. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781446249222.n35>

Allah ﷺ said:

*Allah, there is no God but Him, the Living, the Sustainer. He has revealed the Book to you in truth, confirming what was before it, and He revealed the Torah and the Gospel.<sup>5</sup>*

And Allah ﷺ said:

*Have faith in what I have revealed, confirming that which is already with you, and be not the first to deny it.<sup>6</sup>*

As a general rule, what Prophet Muhammad ﷺ preached is simply a renewal of the religion preached by the previous prophets and expressed in their extant scriptures, a final correction of the misinterpretations and interpolations that crept into the prophetic traditions over the ages. Islam, a theological concept that means submission and surrender to the will of God, is the fundamental religious idea of all the prophets and thus all prophets can be considered *Muslims* in this sense. Jews, Christians, and adherents of other scriptural religions are addressed as “people of the Book,” acknowledging their faith in the previous prophets before Muhammad ﷺ. Islam is certainly not a perennialist philosophy that denies any meaningful differences between religions with regard to salvation. Rather there are some important differences between Islam, Judaism, and Christianity, but at the same time there is agreement on some important spiritual fundamentals.

The common spiritual fundamentals between the Abrahamic faiths must be the starting point in any interfaith dialogue. In fact, the Qur'an commands Muslims and the people of the Book to come to an agreement, in principle, on faith in the One True God, the Creator of the universe and all humanity.

Allah ﷺ said:

*Say, 'O People of the Book, come to a common word between us and you, that we will worship none but Allah and not associate anything with Him, nor take one another as lords instead of Allah.' If they turn*

<sup>5</sup> The Qur'an, Sūrat Āli 'Imrān 3:2-3; all translations of the Qur'an and Arabic texts are by the author.

<sup>6</sup> The Qur'an, Sūrat al-Baqarah 2:41.

*away, then say, ‘Bear witness that we are Muslims (surrendering to the will of Allah).’<sup>7</sup>*

Monotheism, or faith in the One God, is the basis of harmony between Muslims, Jews, and Christians, as well as other people. Genuine monotheism necessarily includes a component of charity towards others, good will, and concern for their well-being, as will be discussed below. The religion of the prophets thus contains a vertical dimension (between an individual and God) and a horizontal dimension (between individuals themselves). We could also say the prophetic religion requires fulfilling the rights of God and the rights of people. Appreciating these facts, which are shared by the Abrahamic faiths, will lead to more harmonious societies.

Jesus Christ عليه السلام expressed these fundamentals in an incredible story that concisely summarizes the message of the Torah, the Psalms, and the Gospel. Jesus عليه السلام was preaching and teaching in the temple and the high priests, feeling their authority was threatened, dispatched their agents to trip him up with difficult questions (a type of pre-modern ‘gotcha journalism,’ so to speak). According to the Gospel of Mark:

*One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, he asked him, ‘Which commandment is the first of all?’ Jesus answered, ‘The first is: Hear O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is One; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength. The second is this: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. There is no commandment greater than these. ’*

*Then the scribe said to him, ‘You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that He is One, and besides Him there is no other; and to love Him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength, and to love one’s neighbor as oneself—this is much more*

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<sup>7</sup> The Qur'an, Sūrat Āli 'Imrān 3:64.

*important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.' When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, 'You are not far from the kingdom of God.' After that no one dared to ask him any question.<sup>8</sup>*

The core of the prophetic teaching is this: love God and love good for your neighbor as you would for yourself. Jesus' answer was so wise and powerful that the high priests knew they could not entrap him into making blasphemous or dubious statements. The first commandment was found in the Old Testament, also known as the *Shema Yisrael*<sup>9</sup> of the Torah, "Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might."<sup>10</sup> And the second commandment is again from the Torah, "You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord."<sup>11</sup> Jesus عليه السلام, like Muhammad ﷺ, was only confirming the teachings of the prophets before him.

On the basis of these common beliefs, principles, and values, a group of 138 Muslim scholars and intellectuals, including many senior imams and muftis, issued an open letter in October 2007 to the leaders of every denomination of Christianity in the world, with specific reference to Pope Benedict XVI. In this letter, they acknowledged the real differences between Islam and other religions, but affirmed that love for God and love for neighbor are the twin pillars of mutual dialogue and cooperation:

*Muslims and Christians together make up well over half of the world's population. Without peace and justice between these two religious communities, there can be no meaningful peace in the world. The future of the world depends on peace between Muslims and Christians. The basis for this peace already exists. It is part of the*

<sup>8</sup> Mark 12:28-34; Coogan et al., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, 1815.

<sup>9</sup> Muslim readers might be interested to note that the Semitic cognate of "hear" *shema* in Hebrew is *samia'* in Arabic أسماع = شماع because the *s* in Arabic maps to the *sh* in Hebrew; e.g., *salaam* = *shalom*.

<sup>10</sup> Deuteronomy 6:4-5; Coogan et al., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, 262.

<sup>11</sup> Leviticus 19:18; Coogan et al., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, 171.

*very foundational principles of both faiths: love of the One God, and love of the neighbor.<sup>12</sup>*

They added further:

*Whilst Islam and Christianity are obviously different religions—and whilst there is no minimizing some of their formal differences—it is clear that the Two Greatest Commandments are an area of common ground and a link between the Qur'an, the Torah, and the New Testament. What prefaces the Two Commandments in the Torah and the New Testament, and what they arise out of, are the Unity of God—that there is only One God... Thus the Unity of God, love of Him, and love of the neighbor form a common ground upon which Islam, Christianity, and Judaism are founded.<sup>13</sup>*

Indeed, Allah commands the Prophet ﷺ in the Qur'an to declare openly his faith in all of the previous prophets, including Jesus عليه السلام.

Allah ﷺ said:

*Say, 'We have faith in Allah, what has been revealed to us, and what was revealed to Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, and the tribes (of Israel), and what was given to Moses and Jesus and what was given to the Prophets from their Lord. We make no distinction between any of them, and we are Muslims (in surrender) to Him.'*<sup>14</sup>

In Islam, we do not have the option of making a distinction between prophets, choosing to believe in some and not others. Rather, we are obliged to believe in all of the prophets specifically named in the Qur'an, as well to hold a general belief in all prophets of the past, who certainly existed but were not named in the text.

<sup>12</sup> Miroslav Volf, Muhammad Ghazi, and Melissa Yarrington, *A Common Word: Muslims and Christians on Loving God and Neighbor* (Michigan: William B Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2010), 28.

<sup>13</sup> Volf et al., *A Common Word: Muslims and Christians on Loving God and Neighbor*, 45-46.

<sup>14</sup> The Qur'an, Sūrat al-Baqarah 2:136.

An important point to mention here is that some prophets were blessed with signs, miracles, and accomplishments that were not given to others, as Allah said, “Among those Messengers, some We favored over others.”<sup>15</sup> We believe Prophet Muhammad ﷺ was honored with the final, unchangeable revelation of the Qur'an. However, even if we believe our Prophet ﷺ is the best prophet, this does not imply that we should ever put down previous prophets like Moses and Jesus عليهما السلام.

The Prophet ﷺ said in general, “Do not say the prophets are better than one another.”<sup>16</sup> On one occasion, a Jewish man and a Muslim man got into a fight in which they invoked their prophets over one another. When news of this reached the Prophet ﷺ, he said, “Do not say I am better than Moses. Verily, people will swoon on the Day of Resurrection and I will be the first to awaken and, behold, Moses will be holding the side of the Throne.”<sup>17</sup> The Prophet ﷺ refused to put himself ahead of Moses عليه السلام, citing the fact that Moses would be holding the Throne of Allah on Judgment Day, an honor he would not have. On another occasion, a man came to the Prophet ﷺ and he called him, saying, “O best of creation!” The Prophet ﷺ replied, “That is Abraham, upon him be peace.”<sup>18</sup> Out of humility, our Prophet ﷺ refused to be addressed as the ‘best of creation,’ instead granting that honor to his forefather Abraham عليه السلام (and perhaps to forestall this issue causing discord between Jews, Christians, and Muslims).

Having established a general respect for the monotheistic prophets, it naturally follows that those who have faith in the True God must treat others the way they would like to be treated. Allah not only commands us to behave well with others, but it is also part of our God-given conscience to feel empathy for others. The Prophet ﷺ said, “None of you has faith until he loves for people what he loves for himself, and until he loves a person for no reason other than Allah.”<sup>19</sup> In

<sup>15</sup> The Qur'an, Sūrat al-Baqarah 2:253.

<sup>16</sup> Muslim, *Saḥīḥ Muslim* ([Bayrūt]: Dār Ihyā' al-Kutub al-'Arabīyah, 1955), 4:1845 #2374, *kitab al-Fada'il bab min fada'il Musa sall Allahu alayhi wa salam*.

<sup>17</sup> al-Bukhārī, *Saḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* (Bayrūt: Dār Ṭawq al-Najjāh, 2002), 8:108 #6517, *kitab al-Riqaq bab nafkh al-sur*.

<sup>18</sup> Muslim, *Saḥīḥ Muslim*, 4:1839 #2369, *kitab al-Fada'il bab min fada'il Ibrahim al-Khalil sall Allahu alayhi wa salam*.

<sup>19</sup> Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad al-Imām Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal* (Bayrūt: Mu'assasat al-Risālah, 2001), 21:353 #13874; declared authentic (*sahīḥ*) by Al-Arnā'ūt et al. in their commentary.

another narration, the Prophet ﷺ said, “Let him treat people the way he would love to be treated.”<sup>20</sup> And in another narration, the Prophet ﷺ said, “Love for people what you love for yourself and you will be a believer; behave well with whoever would be your neighbor and you will be a Muslim.”<sup>21</sup> In Christian tradition, this teaching is known as the ‘golden rule,’ while in philosophy it is known as the ‘ethics of reciprocity.’ This teaching is deeply embedded in Islamic texts, in the Qur'an and Sunnah, and across multiple genres of supplemental religious literature.<sup>22</sup>

The ethics of reciprocity was likewise understood by the early Muslims the way Jesus عليه السلام understood it, as a fundamental principle shared by all the prophets. The early Muslim scholar Tawus ibn Kaysan (d. 106 H) said to his companion, “Would you like me to summarize in this sitting all of the Torah, the Gospel, the Psalms, and the Quran?” He said yes, so Tawus replied, “Fear Allah Almighty more than anything else, hope in Allah more intensely than you fear Him, and love for people what you love for yourself.”<sup>23</sup>

It is no surprise, then, that Prophet Muhammad ﷺ closely identified with Jesus عليه السلام and considered him his brother. The Prophet ﷺ said, “I am the nearest of the people to Jesus the son of Mary in this life and in the Hereafter.” It was said, “How is that, O Messenger of Allah?” The Prophet ﷺ said, “The Prophets are brothers from one father with different mothers. They have one religion and there was no other prophet between us.”<sup>24</sup> Hence, when we examine the teachings of Jesus عليه السلام and Muhammad ﷺ together—notwithstanding the usual controversies over the Trinity, salvation, etc.—we find many parallels between them.

<sup>20</sup> Muslim, *Sahīh Muslim*, 3:1472 #1844, *kitab al-Imarah bab al-amr bi al-wafa' bi bay'ah al-khulafa'*.

<sup>21</sup> Ibn Mājah, *Sunan Ibn Mājah* (Bayrūt: Dār Ihyā' al-Turāth al-'Arabī), 2:1414 #4229, *kitab al-Zuhd bab al-wara' wa al-taqwa*; declared authentic (*sahīh*) by Al-Albānī in the commentary.

<sup>22</sup> Justin Parrott, “The Golden Rule in Islam: Ethics of Reciprocity in Islamic Traditions,” MRes diss., University of Wales Trinity Saint David, 2018.

[https://archive.nyu.edu/bitstream/2451/43458/2/The%20Golden%20Rule%20in%20Islam\\_FINAL.pdf](https://archive.nyu.edu/bitstream/2451/43458/2/The%20Golden%20Rule%20in%20Islam_FINAL.pdf)

<sup>23</sup> Abū Nu‘aym, *Hilyat al-Awliyā' wa Ṭabaqāt al-Asfiyā'* (Miṣr: Maṭba'at al-Sa'ādah, 1974), 3:10.

<sup>24</sup> Muslim, *Sahīh Muslim*, 4:1837 #2365, *kitab al-Fada'il bab fada'il 'Isa alayhi salam*.

For instance, one of the most famous sections of the Bible is the Sermon on the Mount, in which Jesus عليه السلام delivers some of his more important wisdom-sayings, “Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.”<sup>25</sup> Prophet Muhammad عليه وسلم said likewise, in a tradition given great importance in some Islamic curricula, “Be merciful to those on the earth, and the One in the heavens will have mercy upon you.”<sup>26</sup> Jesus said again, “For if you forgive others their trespasses, your Heavenly Father will also forgive you.”<sup>27</sup> And again the Prophet عليه وسلم said, “Forgive others and Allah will forgive you.”<sup>28</sup>

Parallel sayings are not at all uncommon, and in fact should be anticipated if we really believe the prophets were being taught by the same Source. Jesus عليه السلام once told his disciples:

*Then the king will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’*

*Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’<sup>29</sup>*

<sup>25</sup> Matthew 5:7; Coogan et al., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, 1753.

<sup>26</sup> al-Tirmidhī, *Sunan al-Tirmidhī* (Bayrūt: Dār al-Ġarb al-Islāmī, 1998), 3:388 #1924, *abawab al-Birr wal Sillah bab maja'a fi rahmah al-Muslimin*; declared authentic (*sahīh*) by Al-Tirmidhī in the commentary.

<sup>27</sup> Matthew 6:14; Coogan et al., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, 1755.

<sup>28</sup> Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal, *Al-Muṣnād* (al-Qāhirah: Dār al-Ḥadīth, 1995), 6:113 #6541; declared authentic (*sahīh*) by Ahmad Shakir in the commentary.

<sup>29</sup> Matthew 25:34-40; Coogan et al., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, 1784-1785.

Prophet Muhammad ﷺ told his companions a similar story but in Arabic words they could understand:

*Verily, Allah Almighty will say on the Day of Resurrection, 'O son of Adam, I was sick but you did not visit Me.' He will say, 'My Lord, how can I visit you when you are the Lord of the worlds?' Allah will say, 'Did you not know that my servant was sick and you did not visit him, and had you visited him you would have found Me with him? O son of Adam, I asked you for food but you did not feed Me.' He will say, 'My Lord, how can I feed you when you are the Lord of the worlds?' Allah will say, 'Did you not know that my servant asked you for food but you did not feed him, and had you fed him you would have found Me with him? O son of Adam, I asked you for drink but you did not provide for Me.' He will say, 'My Lord, how can I give you drink when you are the Lord of the worlds?' Allah will say, 'My servant asked you for a drink but you did not provide for him, and had you given it to him you would have found Me with him.'*<sup>30</sup>

The lesson here is that we find the blessings and mercy of Allah in serving others, regardless of their status in society. This is a message that all believers in God can get behind.

But some Christians who discover these parallel sayings claim that Prophet Muhammad ﷺ (and we seek refuge in Allah from such a claim) had ‘plagiarized’ and ‘stolen’ these sayings from the New Testament. Such an accusation is spurious because Muhammad ﷺ did not plagiarize Jesus عليه السلام no more than Jesus plagiarized Moses عليه السلام when he cited the Torah on several occasions. If the teachings of Muhammad and Jesus are compatible, it is because they were both inspired by the same One Source.

The earliest Christians to make contact with Muslims noticed these parallel teachings and, for this reason, agreed to protect the Muslims from persecution. Before the migration to Medina, the Prophet ﷺ told some of the most vulnerable

<sup>30</sup> Muslim, *Sahīh Muslim*, 4:1990 #2569, *kitab al-Birr wal Sillah wal Adab bab fadl 'iyadah al-marid*.

Muslims to seek asylum in Abyssinia, because it was ruled by a Christian king (known as Al-Najashi or ‘the Negus’) who was known for his justice. These Muslims made the difficult journey there, only to be pursued by agents of the Meccan oligarchy. They agitated the king against the Muslims, accusing them of saying blasphemous things about Jesus عليه السلام, hoping that the king would hand them over. Ja’far ibn Abi Talib رضي الله تعالى عنه responded eloquently, as recorded by Imam Ahmad ibn Hanbal (d. 241H):

*Ja’far said, ‘O king! We were a people in the depths of ignorance. We adored idols, we ate dead bodies, we lived in immorality, we cut off our families, we were evil to our neighbors, and the strong among us consumed the weak. We were like this until Allah raised a Messenger from among us. We recognized his lineage, his truthfulness, his trustworthiness, and his temperance. He called us to Allah Almighty, that we worship Him exclusively and renounce what we used to worship besides Him of stone statues and idols. He commanded us to be honest in speech, to fulfill the trust, to maintain family ties, to be good to the neighbor, and to refrain from adultery and bloodshed. He prohibited us from vulgarity, telling lies, consuming the wealth of the orphan, and slandering chaste women. He commanded us to worship Allah alone and not associate anything with Him (in worship). He commanded us to pray, to give charity, and to fast. He enumerated the matters of Islam, so we believed in him and had faith in him. We followed him in what he brought, so we worshipped Allah alone and did not associate anything with Him. We forbid what was forbidden for us and we permit what was permitted for us. Our people rose in enmity against us, tortured us and persecuted us to turn us back from our religion to the worship of idols among the servants of Allah...’*

*The Negus said to them, ‘Do you have anything with you from Allah?’ Ja’far said yes. The Negus said, ‘Then recite it to us.’ Ja’far recited the opening verses of Surat Maryam. The Negus began to weep until his beard was soaked, as well as his bishops wept until they soaked their pages, when they heard what was recited to them. Then the*

*Negus said, 'Verily, this chapter and what has come from Moses have emerged from the same light. You are released. By Allah, I will never surrender them.'*<sup>31</sup>

The parallel sayings in the Torah, the Gospel, the Qur'an and the Sunnah are meant to reinforce a singular theological and moral message, founded upon the love of God and love for one's neighbor. This alone is enough to establish a just peace between Christians and Muslims, as it was for the early Muslims and the Abyssinian Christians.

Muslims need not throw out the previous scriptures either, even though the Qur'an and Sunnah have superseded them and have corrected what had been lost or altered.<sup>32</sup> The Prophet ﷺ gave Muslims explicit permission to share stories and wisdom-sayings from the previous scriptures, "Narrate from the children of Israel, for there is no harm."<sup>33</sup> However, scholars like Al-Shafi'i cautioned that this broad permission was restricted to narrating only what one was certain did not contain a false teaching.<sup>34</sup> In other words, Muslims are allowed to cite the Bible as long as it does not contradict anything confirmed by clear texts in the Qur'an and Sunnah. Some scholars discouraged any reference to the previous scriptures or apocryphal Israelite sources, while others were vigorous in their defense of using them.<sup>35</sup>

Nonetheless, the early Muslims were eager to circulate sayings they had obtained from Jewish and Christian sources, often espousing themes common to Abrahamic faiths. These reports were especially plentiful in the early literary genre of piety, asceticism, and righteousness (*al-zuhd*). Malik ibn Dinar used to say, "It is written in the Torah: As you deal with others, so are you dealt with. As you reap, so shall

<sup>31</sup> Ahmad ibn Hanbal, *Musnad al-Imām Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal*, 37:172-173 #22498; declared fair (*hasan*) by Al-Arnā'ūt et al. in their commentary.

<sup>32</sup> Justin Parrott, "Abrogated Rulings in the Qur'an: Discerning their Divine Wisdom," *Yaqeen Institute for Islamic Research*, November 15, 2018.

<https://yaqeeninstitute.org/en/justin-parrott/abrogated-rulings-in-the-quran-discerning-their-divine-wisdom/>

<sup>33</sup> al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, 4:170 #3461, *kitab Ahadīth al-Anbiyā' bab ma dhukira 'an Bani Isra'il*.

<sup>34</sup> Ibn Ḥajar al-'Asqalānī, *Fatḥ al-Bārī bi-Sharḥ al-Bukhārī* (Bayrūt: Dār al-Ma'rifah, 1959), 6:499.

<sup>35</sup> Walid Saleh, *In Defense of the Bible: A Critical Edition and an Introduction to Al-Biqā'ī's Bible Treatise* (Leiden: Brill, 2008) 1-2.

you sow.”<sup>36</sup> Many wisdom-sayings of this nature were attributed to prophets like Moses, David, and, of course, Jesus, peace be upon them.

The early Muslims collected sayings attributed to Jesus عليه السلام in relation to eschatology (end-times prophecies), wisdom-sayings that echoed the Gospel, sometimes as evidence against heretical Muslim sects.<sup>37</sup> To illustrate, the historian Ibn ‘Asakir (d. 571H) recorded that Jesus عليه السلام said:

*Blessed is he whose speech is the remembrance of Allah, whose silence is reflection, and whose observation is a lesson, who controls his tongue, whose house is sufficient, who weeps for his sins, and from whose evil the people are safe. O son of Adam, be disinterested in what people own and they will love you, be content with what Allah has allotted for you and you will be the wealthiest of people, love for people what you love for yourself and you will be a believer, do not harm your neighbor and you will be a Muslim, and do not laugh too much as it will deaden the heart.*<sup>38</sup>

Israelite traditions about Jesus عليه السلام also played a role in the critical interpretation (*al-tafsir*) of the Qur'an, using them to enrich the genre and sometimes add details to stories where the Qur'an was silent. The classical exegete Ibn Kathir (d. 774H/1373CE), for example, utilizes a saying ascribed to Jesus عليه السلام to explain the meaning of the Qur'anic word ‘good-doer’ (*muhsin*), “Verily, excellence (*al-ihsan*) is that you are good to those who are evil to you, not that you are good only to those who are good to you.”<sup>39</sup> Al-Suyuti (d. 911H/1505CE) also makes use of several wisdom-sayings attributed to Jesus in his commentary.<sup>40</sup> The role of Israelite traditions in Qur'anic commentary is contentious among Muslim

<sup>36</sup> Abū Ḥātim al-Rāzī, *Al-Zuhd* (al-Riyāḍ: Dār Aṭlas, 2000), 1:67 #76.

<sup>37</sup> Tarif Khalidi, *The Muslim Jesus: Sayings and Stories in Islamic Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 32..

<sup>38</sup> Ibn ‘Asākir, *Tārīkh Madīnat Dimashq* (Bayrūt: Dār al-Fikr, 1995), 47:439.

<sup>39</sup> Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr al-Qur’ān al-‘Aẓīm* (Bayrūt: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyah, 1998), 6:266 verse 29:69.

<sup>40</sup> Shabir Ally, *The Culmination of Tradition-Based Tafsir the Qur'an Exegesis "al-Durr Al-Manthur" of Al-Suyuti* (d. 911/1505). (Ottawa: Library and Archives Canada = Bibliothèque et Archives Canada, 2013), 180-224.

[https://tspace.library.utoronto.ca/bitstream/1807/35061/1/Ally\\_Shabir\\_201211\\_PhD\\_thesis.pdf.pdf](https://tspace.library.utoronto.ca/bitstream/1807/35061/1/Ally_Shabir_201211_PhD_thesis.pdf.pdf)

scholars, which will be important to note later when Muslim narratives about Jesus عليه السلام are analyzed.

To recap, Muslims have much common ground in the figure of Jesus عليه السلام for a productive and fruitful dialogue with Christians, hopefully resulting in mutual respect, social harmony, and cooperation on global challenges relevant to humanity at large. The two fundamental principles at the base of this common ground are love for God and love for one's neighbor. Expression of these principles should precede any discussion or debate between Christians and Muslims on the theological, metaphysical, and philosophical issues in which they differ.

## Zechariah, John the Baptist, and the Virgin Birth

The Gospels begin with the story of Zechariah, John the Baptist, and Mary عليهما السلام and her miraculous virgin birth; the Qur'anic narrative also mentions these important figures. In fact, the Qur'an accords a special status to Mary (in Arabic, *Maryam*) with an entire chapter, which was named after her, revolving around her story. This chapter is the one that Ja'far رضي الله تعالى عنه recited to the Negus and which moved him and his bishops to tears:

*A mention of the mercy of your Lord to His servant Zechariah, as he called upon his Lord in private, saying, 'My Lord, my bones have weakened and my hair has turned gray, and I have never been disappointed in Your supplication, my Lord. Verily, I fear successors after me and my wife has become barren, so grant me an heir from Yourself, who will inherit me and the house of Jacob, and make him pleasing to my Lord.'*

*It was said, 'O Zechariah, we give you glad tidings of a son whose name is John. We have not given anyone before him this name.' Zechariah said, 'My Lord, how will I have a son and my wife has become barren and I have become very old?' It was said, 'Thus said your Lord. It is easy for Him, as He had created you before when you*

*were not yet a thing.’ Zechariah said, My Lord, make a sign for me.’ He said, ‘Your sign is that you will not speak to people for three nights, although in good health.’*

*So he came out to his people from the chamber and inspired them to glorify Allah morning and evening. It was said, ‘O John, hold fast to the Book with strength,’ and We gave him wise judgment even as a child, and tenderness from Us and purity, he was ever righteous and dutiful to his parents, and he was not an obstinate tyrant. Peace be upon him the day he was born, the day he dies, and the day he is brought back to life.<sup>41</sup>*

This passage more or less reaffirms the narrative in the beginning of the Gospel of Luke. Zechariah عليه السلام (in Arabic, *Zakariyyah*), who was heir to the priesthood of Aaron عليه السلام (in Arabic, *Harun*), was afraid that those who came after him would violate the sanctities of the religion and its Temple. He invoked Allah to grant him an heir, despite his and his wife’s old age, and he was answered with the miraculous birth of John. This was not quite like the virgin birth, but it was a miracle nonetheless.

As in the Gospel, the Qur'an presents John عليه السلام as a forerunner and precursor to the coming of Jesus عليه السلام. The Gospel of Mark connects the appearance of John with a prediction from the prophet Isaiah, “A voice cries out: In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.”<sup>42</sup> The voice in the wilderness to prepare the way of the Lord (which as Muslims we understand as *the message* Jesus delivered) was fulfilled by the sudden emergence of John عليه السلام from obscurity:

*John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to*

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<sup>41</sup> The Qur'an, Sūrat Maryam 19:1-15.

<sup>42</sup> Isaiah 40:3; Coogan et al., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, 1019-1020.

*him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.<sup>43</sup>*

John عليه السلام made baptism by water a central ritual in his prophetic career, a physical cleansing that signaled a believer's repentance and hope for the forgiveness of their sins. It is somewhat analogous to the Islamic practice of ablution (*al-wudu'*) before the ritual prayer.

Allah ﷺ said:

*O you who have faith, when you stand for prayer, then wash your faces and your arms to the elbows, and wipe over your heads and wash your feet to the ankles. If you are in a state of ritual impurity, then purify yourselves.<sup>44</sup>*

And the Prophet ﷺ said:

*When a Muslim or a believer washes his face in ablution, then every sin that he committed with his eyes will be washed away with the last drop of water. When he washes his hands, then every sin that he committed with his hands will be washed away with the last drop of water. When he washes his feet, then every sin that he committed with his feet will be washed away with the last drop of water, until he emerges purified from sin.<sup>45</sup>*

Ablution, like John's baptismal, is an outward ritual of purification that should coincide with an inward purification of the heart from spiritual diseases or sins, such as malice, arrogance, greed, and envy.

Along with recounting the stories of Zechariah and John عليهما السلام, the Qur'an also tells us about the birth of Mary عليها السلام. Like John's birth, Mary's birth was an answer to prayer.

<sup>43</sup> Mark 1:4-5; Coogan et al., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, 1792-1793.

<sup>44</sup> The Qur'an, Sūrat al-Mā'idah 5:6.

<sup>45</sup> Muslim, *Sahīh Muslim*, 1:215 #244, *kitab al-Taharah bab khuruj al-khataya min al-ma' al-wudu'*.

Allah ﷺ said:

*Verily, Allah chose Adam, Noah, the family of Abraham, and the family of 'Imran over the worlds, descendants of one another, and Allah is Hearing and Knowing. As the wife of 'Imran said, 'My Lord, I have pledged to Your service what is in my womb, so accept it from me. Verily, You are the Hearing, the Knowing.' When she delivered her, she said, 'Verily, I have given birth to a female.' And Allah knows best what she had birthed, for the male is not like the female. She said, 'Verily, I will name her Mary and I seek refuge in You on behalf of her and her children from the accursed Satan.<sup>46</sup>*

Though Mary's birth was not miraculous as compared to those of John or Jesus عليهما السلام, it was special in that her mother's prayer of protection from Satan was uniquely answered. The Prophet ﷺ said, "No person is born but that he is pricked by Satan and he cries from the touch of Satan, except for Mary and her son." Abu Hurayrah added, "Recite the verse if you wish: I seek refuge in You on behalf of her and her children from the accursed Satan" (3:36).<sup>47</sup> It can be understood from this tradition that Mary and Jesus were uniquely protected from Satan, although some scholars believe this is a characteristic of all the prophets. Al-Nawawi (d. 676H/1277CE) comments on this tradition, "This is an obvious virtue. The literal meaning of the tradition is that this is specific to Jesus and his mother, but Al-Qadi 'Iyad (d. 554H/1149CE) preferred the opinion that it was shared between the prophets."<sup>48</sup> It may be that this honor is unique to Mary and Jesus, but scholars wanted to be clear that this does not imply that other prophets were misled by Satan.

Now we come to the miraculous virgin birth, the creation of Jesus عليه السلام in the womb of his mother without a father.

Allah ﷺ said:

<sup>46</sup> The Qur'ān, Sūrat Āli 'Imrān 3:33-36.

<sup>47</sup> al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, 4:164 #3431, *bab qawl Allah ta'ala wadhkur fil Kitabi Maryam*.

<sup>48</sup> al-Nawawī, *Sharh al-Nawawī 'alá Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, 15:120 #2366.

*Mention in the Book, Mary, when she withdrew from her family to a place toward the east. She veiled herself in seclusion from them. Then We sent to her Our Angel in the form of a well-proportioned man. She said, 'Verily, I seek refuge in the Most Merciful from you, if you fear Allah!' He said, 'I am only the messenger of your Lord to deliver news of a pure son.' She said, 'How can I have a boy while no man has touched me and I have not been unchaste?' He said, 'Thus it is so, your Lord says, 'It is easy for Me, and We will make him a sign to the people and a mercy from Us. It is a matter already decreed.'*<sup>49</sup>

Mary عليه السلام herself was the recipient of miracles to aid her during her suffering:

*The pains of childbirth drove her to the trunk of a palm tree. She said, 'Would that I had died before this and been a thing forgotten!' Then he (the angel) called from below her, 'Do not be sad, for your Lord has provided a stream beneath you. Shake the trunk of the palm tree towards you and ripe dates will fall upon you. Eat, drink, and be comforted.'*<sup>50</sup>

People would inevitably wonder why Mary عليه السلام would suddenly appear with a baby in her arms. They would obviously suspect her of having committed adultery, something especially scandalous given her place in the family of priesthood. But indeed it was the baby Jesus عليه السلام who spoke from the cradle in defense of his mother's chastity:

*Then she brought him to her people, carrying him. They said, 'O Mary, you have done something unheard of! O sister of Aaron, your father was not an evil man, nor was your mother unchaste!' Thus she pointed to him, and they said, 'How can we speak to a babe in the cradle?' Jesus said, 'Verily, I am the servant of Allah. He has given me the Book and made me a prophet. He has made me blessed wherever I am and has enjoined prayer and charity upon me for as*

<sup>49</sup> The Qur'ān, Sūrat Maryam 19:16-21.

<sup>50</sup> The Qur'ān, Sūrat Maryam 19:23-26.

*long as I live, and to be dutiful to my mother and He has not made me an obstinate tyrant. Peace is upon me the day I was born, the day I will die, and the day I am raised to life.*<sup>51</sup>

The onlookers could no longer think of Mary عليه السلام as an adulteress, for they saw the miracle of Jesus عليه السلام speaking from the cradle on behalf of his mother.

Some critics of Islam have pointed to this passage as an alleged historical error, since Mary was not literally the sister of Aaron. From the context, however, the onlookers referred to her as ‘sister of Aaron’ in reference to her family’s status in the priesthood, since she was basically a priestess being accused of adultery. This textual criticism was actually leveled against Islam in the time of the Prophet ﷺ and he answered it. Al-Mughirah ibn Shu’bah reported:

*When I came to Najran, the Christian monks asked me, ‘You recite the verse: O sister of Aaron (19:28), whereas Moses was born long before Jesus by many years.’ When I came back to the Messenger of Allah ﷺ, I asked him about it and he said, ‘Verily, they would name people with the names of prophets and righteous people before them.’*

<sup>52</sup>

Ali ibn Abi Talhah and Al-Suddi said, “It was said to her, ‘O sister of Aaron,’ meaning the brother of Moses, because she was from his lineage. As it is said to one from the tribe of Al-Tamim, ‘O brother of Tamim!’ and to one from the tribe of Al-Mudari, ‘O brother of Mudar!’<sup>53</sup> One needs to be aware of how the Arabs, and ancient people in general, used expressions in their language to understand what they meant. This criticism, then, is simply a misinterpretation of the verse.

Due to Mary’s incredible story, her righteous behavior and chastity, the angel who spoke to her, the miracles she experienced, and the great prophet she gave birth to without a father, she is highly revered in Islam as one of the best women who ever lived. The Prophet ﷺ said, “The best of women was Mary, daughter of ‘Imran.”

<sup>51</sup> The Qur’ān, Sūrat Maryam 19:27-33

<sup>52</sup> Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, 3:1685 #2135, *kitab al-Adab bab al-nahi ‘an al-takanni bi Abi al-Qasim*.

<sup>53</sup> Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr al-Qur’ān al-‘Azīm*, 5:201 verse 19:28.

<sup>54</sup> Moreover, she is an example for believers everywhere on account of her faith and devotion.

Allah ﷺ said:

*Allah strikes an example for those who have faith... Mary, daughter of 'Imran, who preserved her chastity. Thus, We blew into (her garment) from Our Spirit. She believed in the words of her Lord and His Books, and she was devoutly obedient.*<sup>55</sup>

As a matter of fact, some scholars went so far as to declare Mary عليه السلام to be a prophet in her own right. Ibn Hajar writes:

*It has been related from Al-Ash'ari that those among women who achieved prophethood are six: Eve, Sarah, the mother of Moses, Hagar, Asiyah (the wife of Pharaoh), and Mary. The criterion of prophethood for him is that whomever an angel came to from Allah with a judgment related to a command, a prohibition, or a sign of what is to come, then they are considered to be a prophet.*<sup>56</sup>

If we define prophet as someone to whom an angel spoke righteously or experienced miracles, then Mary عليه السلام was definitely among this category of honored servants of Allah. Some scholars of the classical tradition, such as Al-Razi, however, disputed this interpretation since they defined prophethood differently than Abu Hasan al-Ash'ari and others.<sup>57</sup>

In sum, the figures of Zechariah, John, and Mary in Islam, peace be upon them, are highly revered examples of faith and virtue. Muslims are obligated to believe in the stories as they are recounted in the Qur'an, which include the miraculous births of John and Jesus. Mary, in particular, is the paragon of a female believer, a perfect role model for women of faith as well as men.

<sup>54</sup> al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, 4:164 #3432, *bab wa idh qalat al-mala'ikah ya Maryam*.

<sup>55</sup> The Qur'an, Sūrat al-Tahrīm 66:12.

<sup>56</sup> Ibn Hajar al-'Asqalānī, *Fatḥ al-Bārī bi-Sharḥ al-Bukhārī*, 6:447.

<sup>57</sup> Hosn Abboud and Angelika Neuwirth, *Mary in the Qur'an: A Literary Reading* (London: Routledge, 2014), 157.

## Jesus the Christ, the Word, the Spirit

Jesus عليه السلام has important titles in Islam stated directly in the Qur'an and Sunnah, which every Muslim must believe in without doubt.

Allah جل جلاله said:

*As the angels said, 'O Mary, Allah gives you glad tidings of a word from Him, whose name will be the Messiah, Jesus the son of Mary, distinguished in this world and the Hereafter and among those near (to Allah).'<sup>58</sup>*

And Allah جل جلاله said:

*And she who guarded her chastity, so We blew into (her garment) from Our Spirit, and We made her and her son a sign for the worlds.<sup>59</sup>*

The Prophet ﷺ said:

*Whoever testifies that there is no God but Allah alone without any partners, and that Muhammad is his servant and his messenger, and that Jesus is the servant of Allah, son of his maidservant, His word which He bestowed upon Mary and a spirit from Him, and that Paradise is the truth and Hellfire is the truth, then Allah will admit him into any of the eight gates of Paradise he wishes.<sup>60</sup>*

In these texts, there are three main titles ascribed to Jesus عليه السلام: the Messiah (or Christ), the Spirit, and the Word. Each of these titles has a specific meaning in Islam which differs from its interpretation by Christians.

The most important title for Jesus عليه السلام, which distinguished him from all other prophets, is his designation as the Messiah (*al-Masih*). The English word

<sup>58</sup> The Qur'an, Sūrat Āli 'Imrān 3:45.

<sup>59</sup> The Qur'an, Sūrat al-Anbiyā' 21:91.

<sup>60</sup> al-Bukhārī, *Sahīh al-Bukhārī*, 4:165 #3435, *bab qawlihi ya Ahl al-Kitab la tagħlu fi dinikum*.

‘Messiah’ derives from the Hebrew title *Mashiyach* and its Arabic equivalent comes from the root *ma-sa-ha*, meaning “to wipe.” It is also the equivalent of the Greek word *Christós*, from which is derived the English word ‘Christ,’ meaning “the anointed one,” with ‘anoint’ simply being another word for wiping or rubbing with oil. This was an act done to confer kingship upon someone, such as when David عليه السلام was anointed king of Israel, as recorded in the book of Samuel, “Then Samuel took the horn of oil, and anointed him in the presence of his brothers; and the spirit of the Lord came mightily upon David from that day forward.”<sup>61</sup> Jesus عليه السلام was considered by the disciples to be the rightful heir to the kingdom of David عليه السلام as spoken of in Old Testament prophecies. The Gospel of Matthew begins with the first lines of an account of the “genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham.”<sup>62</sup>

Classical Muslim exegetes have described some complementary interpretations of the title Messiah. According to Al-Tabari (d. 310H), the word ‘Messiah’ means “he is wiped” because “Allah wiped him and purified him of sins.” Sa’id said, “Indeed, he is named the Messiah because he has been wiped with blessings.”<sup>63</sup> And Ibn Kathir offers another interpretation, “It is said that if he wiped anyone who was afflicted by ailments, they would be cured by the permission of Allah.”<sup>64</sup> Thus, the early Muslims believed Jesus Christ عليه السلام to be sinless, blessed, a healer, and a worker of miracles. Some of them also understood Messiah to mean he was heir to the kingdom and prophetic lineage of David عليه السلام. Kalbi said, “The Messiah is the king, dignified in status in the world and in his position in the Hereafter.”<sup>65</sup> All of these interpretations, while apparently diverging, are in reality different layers of meanings for the title Messiah.

Another important title is the designation of Jesus عليه السلام as ‘a word’ from Allah. Qatadah interpreted the verse that Jesus is “a word from Him” to mean that he was created without a father by the word of Allah, “Be.” As Allah said, “Verily, the

<sup>61</sup> 1 Samuel 16:13; Coogan et al., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, 424.

<sup>62</sup> Matthew 1:1; Coogan et al., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, 1748.

<sup>63</sup> al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘ al-Bayān ‘an Ta’wīl al-Qur’ān*, 6:414 verse 3:45.

<sup>64</sup> Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr al-Qur’ān al-‘Aṣīm*, 2:36 verse 3:45.

<sup>65</sup> Abū al-Layth al-Samarqandī, *Tafsīr al-Samarqandī*, *al-Musammā, Baḥr al-‘Ulūm* (Bayrūt: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmīyah, 1993), 1:213 verse 3:45.

example of Jesus to Allah is like that of Adam. He created him from dust and then He said to him, ‘Be,’ and he was.”<sup>66</sup> Al-Tabari added, “Allah Almighty named him as His word because he came from His word.”<sup>67</sup> And Al-Harawi said, “He is named as a word because it was from the word that he came, as it is said from the rain is mercy.”<sup>68</sup> Jesus as the word, then, is a reference to the miraculous virgin birth. It could also be said that the word of Allah was delivered to us through him.

The third title given to Jesus عليه السلام is that he is the spirit from Allah. Like the word used in reference to the virgin birth, the spirit is likened to the creation of Adam from nothing. Allah ‘blew’ His spirit into Jesus, just as He did for Adam.

Allah جل جلاله said:

*Thus when I have formed (Adam) and blew into him from My Spirit, then fall down in prostration to him.*<sup>69</sup>

To say that Jesus عليه السلام is the ‘spirit of God’ is a compound noun of *possession*, not of *attribution*. That is, Jesus was a spirit created by Allah and is under the ownership of Allah, not that Jesus shares in the essence of Allah. The phrase does not indicate that Jesus عليه السلام shares in the divinity of Allah.

## The Prophet of Miracles, the Holy Spirit

Jesus عليه السلام was given unique signs and miracles to prove to the Israelites that he was truly a messenger from Allah. He performed these miracles by means of the Holy Spirit (*Ruh al-Quđus*), which Muslims understand to be a title for the Angel Gabriel عليه السلام or a general term for the power of Allah working through him. Unlike Christianity, Muslims do not believe that the Holy Spirit is itself part of

<sup>66</sup> The Qur’ān, Sūrat Āli ‘Imrān 3:59.

<sup>67</sup> al-Tabarī, *Jāmi‘ al-Bayān ‘an Ta’wīl al-Qur’ān*, 6:411 verse 3:45.

<sup>68</sup> al-Nawawī, *Sharḥ al-Nawawī ‘alá Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim* (Bayrūt: Dār Ihyā’ al-Turāth al-’Arabī, 1972), 1:227.

<sup>69</sup> The Qur’ān, Sūrat al-Hijr 15:29.

Allah or shares anything in the divine essence. It is not a separate god to be worshiped or prayed to, but is a power under the control of Allah.

Allah ﷺ said:

*We gave Jesus, the son of Mary, clear evidence and supported him with the Holy Spirit.<sup>70</sup>*

Qatadah, Al-Sudi, Al-Rabia', and many others explained that the Holy Spirit in this verse refers to “the Angel Gabriel.”<sup>71</sup> But Ibn Abbas explained the Holy Spirit to be “the name of that by which Jesus would bring life to the dead.”<sup>72</sup> We can reconcile these two interpretations if we understand that it was through the Angel Gabriel that Jesus عليه السلام was given power from Allah to resurrect the dead. As such, Muslims do not believe that the Holy Spirit is the third person of the Godhead in the Trinity. Rather, the Holy Spirit was the means by which Allah granted Jesus عليه السلام various miracles.

From his miraculous birth, speaking in the cradle, raising the dead to life, and ascending to the heavens, Jesus' entire career was full of signs and wonders meant to strengthen people's faith in the One True God and His prophets.

Allah ﷺ said:

*Mary said, “My Lord, how will I have a child when no man has touched me?” The angel said, “Such is Allah, for He creates what He wills. When He decrees a matter, He only says to it, 'Be,' and it is. He will teach him writing, wisdom, the Torah, and the Gospel, a messenger to the Children of Israel, saying, 'Verily, I have come to you with a sign from your Lord, that I create for you the form of a bird from clay, then I breathe into it and it becomes a bird with permission of Allah. I cure the blind and the leper, and I give life to the dead, with permission of Allah. I tell you what you eat and what*

<sup>70</sup> The Qur'ān, Sūrat al-Baqarah 2:87.

<sup>71</sup> al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘ al-Bayān ‘an Ta’wīl al-Qur’ān*, 2:320 verse 2:87.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:321.

*you store in your houses. Verily, in that is a sign for you, if you are believers.’’<sup>73</sup>*

And Allah ﷺ said:

*As Allah will say, ‘O Jesus, son of Mary, remember My favor upon you and your mother when I strengthened you with the Holy Spirit and you spoke to the people in the cradle and in maturity, when I taught you writing, wisdom, the Torah, and the Gospel, when you created the form of a bird from clay with My permission, then you breathed into it and it became a bird with My permission. You healed the blind and the leper with My permission, and when you brought forth the dead with My permission, and when I held back the Children of Israel from you as you came to them with clear evidence, yet those who disbelieved among them said, ‘This is clearly nothing but magic!’’<sup>74</sup>*

Miracles function to inspire faith in the believers, in addition to the prophetic teachings themselves. In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus عليه السلام said, “Go and tell John what you have seen and heard; the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them.”<sup>75</sup>

One of the most famous miracles in the New Testament is the resurrection of Lazarus. He had fallen ill and it was hoped that Jesus عليه السلام would be able to heal him, but he did not arrive until Lazarus had been dead for four days. Jesus went to the tomb, praised God, and “cried out with a loud voice, ‘Lazarus, come out!’ The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, ‘Unbind him, and let him go.’ Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.”<sup>76</sup>

<sup>73</sup> The Qur'ān, Sūrat Āli 'Imrān 3:47-49.

<sup>74</sup> The Qur'ān, Sūrat al-Mā'idah 5:110.

<sup>75</sup> Luke 7:22; Coogan et al., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, 1842.

<sup>76</sup> John 11:43-45; Coogan et al., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, 1902.

Another famous miracle retold in the Qur'an is Jesus' feeding of the multitudes.

Allah ﷺ said:

*As the disciples said, 'O Jesus, son of Mary, is your Lord able to send down a table of food for us from the heavens?' Jesus said, 'Fear Allah, if you are believers.' They said, 'We want to eat from it and put our hearts at rest and know that you have spoken the truth, that we will witness to it.' Jesus, son of Mary, said, 'O Allah, our Lord, send down upon us a table of food from the heavens, to be a festival for the first and the last of us, a sign from You. Provide for us, as You are the Best of Providers.'*<sup>77</sup>

It is said that what was sent down was some portions of barley bread and fish. Wahb ibn Munabbih was asked, "Was that enough to suffice them?" Wahb said, "It was not, but Allah multiplied them with blessings. Some people ate and then left. Other people came, ate, and then left, until everyone had eaten and there was still some left over."<sup>78</sup> The Gospel of Matthew records the incident as such, "Taking the five loaves and the two fish, (Jesus) looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full."<sup>79</sup>

A key point in the Qur'anic retelling of this story is that the disciples asked for a sign so that they would be reassured. Because they had faith, Allah gave them the sign they asked for but with the following warning:

*Allah said, 'Verily, I will send it down to you, but whoever disbelieves among you afterwards I will indeed punish him the likes of which I have not punished anyone in the worlds.'*<sup>80</sup>

<sup>77</sup> The Qur'an, Sūrat al-Mā'idah 5:112-114.

<sup>78</sup> al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi 'al-Bayān 'an Ta'wīl al-Qur'ān*, 11:227 verse 5:114.

<sup>79</sup> Matthew 14:19-20; Coogan et al., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, 1768.

<sup>80</sup> The Qur'an, Sūrat al-Mā'idah 5:115.

The reason that they would be severely punished is “because they would have witnessed a brilliant sign and then disbelieved obstinately and wrongly, thus they would have deserved a painful punishment and a severe chastisement.”<sup>81</sup> Miracles can be a double-edged sword; they are a blessing for those who see them and believe in them, but a curse for those who see them and still reject faith.

The Quraysh had once asked the Prophet ﷺ to perform a miracle and he refused out of mercy for them. The Angel Gabriel came to him and told him that he could turn the Mount Safa into gold for them, but if they rejected faith afterwards they would be severely punished; otherwise, the door of repentance and mercy would remain open. So the Prophet ﷺ replied, “Rather, the door of repentance and mercy.”<sup>82</sup> He knew that they did not really have faith, so to show them a miracle they were not ready for would be to condemn them. At other times, the Prophet ﷺ performed miracles in front of his companions, as recorded by Anas رضي الله عنه:

*I saw the Messenger of Allah ﷺ during the afternoon prayer and the people were asking for water to perform ablution but they could not find it. Some water was brought to the Messenger of Allah and he placed his hand in the vessel and ordered people to perform ablution. I saw water sprouting from his fingers and the people performed ablution until even the last person could do it.<sup>83</sup>*

Whether or not a prophet should perform a miracle depends on the audience. A group of people might have strong unbelief and doubt in their hearts, which means they would neither believe in nor benefit from a miracle. In that case, it is best for them not to see it. It may be for this reason that Jesus عليه السلام reportedly did not perform miracles after people rejected him in his hometown:

*Then Jesus said to them, ‘Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house.’*

<sup>81</sup> 'Abd al-Rahmān ibn Nāṣir al-Sa'dī, *Taysīr al-Karīm al-Rahmān fī Tafsīr Kalām al-Mannān* (Bayrūt: Mu'assasat al-Risālah, 2000), 1:249 verse 5:115.

<sup>82</sup> Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnād al-Imām Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal*, 4:59-60 #2165; declared authentic (*ṣaḥīḥ*) by Al-Arnā'ūṭ et al. in their commentary.

<sup>83</sup> Muslim, *Saḥīḥ Muslim*, 4:1783 #2279, *kitab al-Fada'il bab mu'jizat al-Nabi* *sall Allahu alayhi wa salam*.

*And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them. And he was amazed at their unbelief.<sup>84</sup>*

Prophet Muhammad ﷺ himself wanted to show his people spectacular signs like the ones that were given to the prophets before him, but it was Allah's Wisdom not to grant him such signs. The Prophet ﷺ said:

*I asked my Lord a question I wish I had not asked. I said, 'O Lord, there were messengers before me, among them those for whom you subordinated the wind and among them those who resurrected the dead.' Allah said, 'Did I not find you as an orphan and give you refuge? Did I not find you lost and guide you?<sup>85</sup> Have I not opened your heart and lifted your burdens?<sup>86</sup> I said, 'Of course, O Lord.'<sup>87</sup>*

Some Christians might wonder why we should follow Prophet Muhammad ﷺ when other prophets were given different miracles. Indeed, the Prophet ﷺ wanted miracles like the other prophets, but Allah responded with verses from the Qur'an. Allah reminded him that not only was he blessed with divine guidance, but also that he was given the greatest miracle of all, the Qur'an. Even so, the Prophet ﷺ did perform a number of miracles for his companions, such as multiplying water sources and accurately foretelling future events.<sup>88</sup>

Unlike the miracles of other prophets, which are restricted to specific times, places, and people, the Qur'an is a living linguistic miracle, a masterpiece that can be experienced by anyone who reads it and ponders over it.

Ibn Kathir writes:

<sup>84</sup> Mark 6:4-6; Coogan et al., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, 1802.

<sup>85</sup> The Qur'an, Sūrat al-Duhā 93:6-7.

<sup>86</sup> The Qur'an, Sūrat al-Sharḥ 94:1-2.

<sup>87</sup> Al-Ṭabarānī, *Al-Mu'jam al-Awsat* (al-Qāhirah: Dār al-Ḥaramayn, 1995), 4:75 #3651; declared authentic (*sahīh*) by Albānī in *Silsilat Al-Aḥādīth Al-Ṣaḥīḥah* (al-Riyāḍ: Maktabat al-Ma'ārif, 1996), 6:86 #2538.

<sup>88</sup> Mohammad Elshinawy, "The Prophecies of the Prophet ﷺ: Proofs of Prophethood Series," *Yaqeen Institute for Islamic Research*. April 9 2018.

<https://yaqeeninstitute.org/en/mohammad-elshinawy/the-prophecies-of-the-prophet-%EF%BA-proofs-of-prophethood-series/>

*The miracles of every prophet in his time were appropriate to the people in that time. It is mentioned that Moses, upon him be peace, had miracles appropriate to his time, as they had been skilled in occult magical arts. So he was sent with signs that dazzled the sights and humbled the necks...*

*Likewise, Jesus, son of Mary was sent in a time of many wise doctors, so he was sent with miracles they could not perform or understand how to do. That a doctor cures the unseeing suffering from blindness, and the leper and the outcast, and whoever was chronically ill; how can anyone of the creation make the dead rise from their graves? This was known to everyone as a miracle indicating the truthfulness of the one who did it and the power with which he was sent.*

*Likewise, Muhammad ﷺ was sent in a time of eloquence and rhetoric, so Allah revealed to him the Mighty Qur'an, which contains no falsehood within it, a revelation from the Wise, the Praiseworthy.<sup>89</sup>*

Therefore, it is part of Allah's Wisdom to provide different prophets with different miracles. As mentioned earlier, that one prophet is given an apparently greater miracle than another does not imply that we should get into arguments over which prophet is superior. Rather, we should respect all of them equally.

## Jesus عليه السلام, the Son of God?

The most important point of disagreement between Islam and Christianity is over the alleged divinity of Jesus عليه السلام and its relationship to one's salvation. It can be difficult to discuss the nature of Christ with Christians, which is why it is so essential to establish the common ground mentioned earlier.

For most Christians today, believing in the divinity of Jesus—that he was literally God in person—is a core tenet of their creed. They believe it is necessary to

<sup>89</sup> Ibn Kathīr, *Qisas al-Anbiyā'* (al-Qāhirah: Maṭba'at Dār al-Ta'līf, 1968), 2:430.

believe that Jesus was God in order to be saved. Muslims, however, believe that Jesus عليه السلام was a great prophet and messenger of Allah, but he was still a created human being and not an object of worship himself.

The Islamic understanding of monotheism (*al-tawhid*) is based upon the Unity of God in three respects: unity of Attributes (no one is like God), unity of Lordship (no one creates from nothing but God), and unity of Divinity (no one deserves to be worshiped but God).<sup>90</sup> Allah, or God, is the One and Only Creator, perfect in Wisdom, Knowledge, and Power, completely unique in Names and Attributes. All created beings are under Allah and dependent upon Him, including the prophets and saints, so no created being is worthy of worship.

Islamic monotheism is concisely expressed in a short chapter of four verses, which the Prophet ﷺ said is equivalent to one-third of the Qur'an:

*Say, 'He is Allah, the One, Allah the Eternal Refuge. He neither begets nor is He begotten, nor is there anyone equal to Him.'*<sup>91</sup>

Allah is *Al-Ahad*, meaning one and unique without the possibility of a second. He is *Al-Samad*, the one to whom everyone turns for help. He does not give birth to other gods and He was not born from a god, but rather has always existed eternally without beginning or end. Nothing in the world or existence can compare to Him, “There is nothing like Him, for He is the Hearing, the Seeing.”<sup>92</sup> Even words we use to describe Allah like “Hearing” and “Seeing” or even “Him” are due to the conventions of language; His Hearing is perfect in every way, while everything else has limited hearing.

The Qur'an tells us that Jesus عليه السلام never ascribed divinity to himself nor commanded others to worship him, but rather he preached the worship of One God like all the prophets before him, “Jesus said, ‘Verily, Allah is my Lord and your Lord, so worship Him; that is the straight path.’”<sup>93</sup> It is not true in Islam to say that

<sup>90</sup> Al-Ṭahāwī and ’Alī ibn ’Alī Ibn Abī al-’Izz, *Sharḥ al-’Aqīdah al-Tahāwīyah* (Bayrūt: Mu’assasat al-Risālah, 1997), 1:24.

<sup>91</sup> The Qur'an, Sūrat al-Ikhlas 112:1-4.

<sup>92</sup> The Qur'an, Sūrat al-Shūrā 42:11.

<sup>93</sup> The Qur'an, Sūrat Āli ‘Imrān 3:51.

Jesus is the son of God, in the literal sense of that phrase. After revealing the story of Mary and Jesus, Allah said, “That is Jesus, the son of Mary, a word of truth which they doubt. It is not for Allah to take a son, glory to Him! When He decrees a manner, He only says to it, ‘Be’ and it is.”<sup>94</sup> Again, that is a hard thing to tell Christians who are so invested in Trinitarian theology, but it is the truth as we understand it.

The phrase ‘son of God’ certainly was important to the early Christians, appearing several times in the New Testament in different contexts. But what does this term mean? Does it mean Jesus عليه السلام was *literally* the son of God? Or was it an honorific title for a righteous servant of God? To infer what the phrase meant to the earliest believers in Christ, we need to examine how it is used in the Old Testament, or Torah.

In the book of Exodus, the Israelites are referred to as God’s children, “Then you shall say to Pharaoh, ‘Thus says the Lord: Israel is my firstborn son.’”<sup>95</sup> And again in the book of Hosea, “When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son.”<sup>96</sup> It is used in the book of Job to refer to the angels, “One day the heavenly beings (Heb. “sons of God”) came to present themselves before the Lord, and Satan also came among them.”<sup>97</sup> And in the Wisdom of Solomon, the Greek term *pais* (which means son or servant) is used to refer to righteous people, “He professes to have knowledge of God, and calls himself a child of the Lord.”<sup>98</sup> The Greek word *pais* is particularly insightful in this instance, since it indicates that ‘son of God’ could be understood as a synonym for ‘servant of God.’

The term ‘son of God’ was also not specific to Old Testament prophecies foretelling the coming of the Messiah. It simply had no connotation of divinity at all. According to the *Oxford Dictionary of the Jewish Religion*, it was:

*...a term occasionally found in Jewish literature, biblical and post-biblical, but nowhere implying physical descent of a human from*

<sup>94</sup> The Qur'ān, Sūrat Maryam 19:34-35.

<sup>95</sup> Exodus 4:22; Coogan et al., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, 88.

<sup>96</sup> Hosea 11:1; Coogan et al., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, 1271.

<sup>97</sup> Job 1:6; Coogan et al., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, 727.

<sup>98</sup> Wisdom of Solomon 2:12-13; Coogan et al., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, 1428.

*the Godhead... The application of the term to Jesus by the early Christian church was probably a combination of the metaphorical use of the term in Jewish apocryphal literature with the more material conception of the divine man (*theios anēr*) common in surrounding cultures of the day.<sup>99</sup>*

As such, the disciples and the earliest believers in Christ, who were essentially practicing Jews who accepted the promised Messiah, would not have understood the term ‘son of God’ to imply actual divinity. It is likely that the meaning of the term shifted as Christianity came under the influence of polytheistic non-Jewish religions and cultures.

In most of the orthodox Gospel accounts, Jesus عليه السلام prefers not to refer to himself as ‘son of God’ but rather as ‘son of man,’ which literally means *son of Adam*. As put by Geoffrey Parrinder:

*In the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke), Jesus never speaks of himself as Son of God, and rarely, if ever, as Son. Cullmann speaks of Jesus’ ‘reserve’ in using this title, and points out that his primary designation for himself was not ‘Son of God’ but ‘Son of Man.’ ‘Son of God’ was said about Jesus by others, demoniacs, disciples, the high priest, and the crowds at the cross. But Jesus himself clearly wished to avoid the misunderstandings that might be attached to this title, ideas that expressed wrong notions of the Messiah.<sup>100</sup>*

Evidently, Jesus عليه السلام was more concerned about emphasizing his humanity, as the original term ‘son of God’ is easily misunderstood, especially when translated into Greek. Even in the Gospel of John, which uses the ‘son of God’ language the most, it is stated that “to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.”<sup>101</sup> That is, those who form a personal

<sup>99</sup> "Son of God." In *The Oxford Dictionary of the Jewish Religion*, edited by Berlin, Adele, and Maxine Grossman. Oxford : Oxford University Press, 2011.

<http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199730049.001.0001/acref-9780199730049-e-3011>

<sup>100</sup> Edward G. Parrinder, *Jesus in the Qur'an* (London: Oneworld, 2013), 128.

<sup>101</sup> John 1:12-13; Coogan et al., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, 1882.

relationship with God through His messenger Jesus Christ are ‘sons of God’ in the sense of being righteous servants of God, a fellowship based upon faith and not familial lineage.

What is more, Christians were never historically unanimous on the alleged divinity of Christ. Arius of Alexandria is perhaps the most famous ‘heretical’ Christian priest who proposed that Jesus عليه السلام was in fact created by God. The theological schism set off a struggle for power in the Roman Empire and Arianism nearly won control, but eventually the Trinitarian theology of the Nicene Creed prevailed.<sup>102</sup> Thereafter, a majority of Christians held that belief in the divinity of Jesus, as expressed in the complex language of Trinitarianism, was *required* for salvation. It is a tenuous position, from Christian sources alone, to claim such a requirement when the Messiah himself declared the greatest commandments to be love of God and love of the neighbor, without any mention of the Trinity.

Another major point of disagreement is the way some Christians understand the doctrine of *sola fide* (Latin for “faith alone”): that works are not essential to faith. A literal understanding of “faith alone” can mislead people into believing that their righteous or sinful actions are not important to their salvation. It is true that works, or good deeds, do not *by themselves* lead to salvation. The Prophet ﷺ said, “None of you will enter Paradise by his good deeds alone, nor would you be rescued from the Hellfire, not even myself, but for the mercy of Allah.”<sup>103</sup> However, good deeds are a necessary component of true faith.

We can never *earn* our way into Paradise, because our good deeds can never be good enough to deserve Paradise. We must have faith as well and rely upon the mercy of Allah. Faith must necessarily result in works; love of God must necessarily result in love for the neighbor. This truth was expressed eloquently in the Epistle of James:

<sup>102</sup> “Arianism,” *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. Accessed November 28, 2018.

<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Arianism>

<sup>103</sup> Muslim, *Sahīḥ Muslim*, 4:2171 #2817, *kitab siffat al-Jannah wal Nar bab lan yudkhilu ahad al-Jannah bi ‘amalihi*.

*What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,’ and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead. But someone will say, ‘You have faith and I have works.’ Show me your faith apart from your works, and I by my works will show you my faith.<sup>104</sup>*

It was because the teachings of Christ were obscured by later generations of Christians, whether intentionally or not, that Allah sent Muhammad ﷺ to renew the true religion and to preserve it for the rest of time in the texts of the Qur'an and Sunnah. The Qur'an respects the faith of the "people of the Book," but at the same time warns them about their errors in religion.

Allah ﷺ said:

*O people of Book, do not exaggerate in your religion, nor say anything about Allah but the truth. Verily, the Messiah, Jesus the son of Mary, was only a messenger of Allah, His word bestowed upon Mary, and a spirit from Him. Have faith in Allah and His messengers and do not say, ‘Three.’ Desist, for it will be better for you. Verily, Allah is only one God. He is Exalted above having a son. To Him belongs whatever is in the heavens and the earth, and sufficient is Allah as a Trustee. The Messiah would never disdain to be a servant of Allah, nor would the angels brought near.<sup>105</sup>*

On the Day of Judgment, Jesus عليه السلام will disavow the worship of those who claimed that he was God.

Allah ﷺ said:

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<sup>104</sup> James 2:14-18; Coogan et al., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, 2122.

<sup>105</sup> The Qur'an, Sūrat al-Nisā' 4:171-172.

*As Allah will say, ‘O Jesus, son of Mary, did you say to the people: Take me and my mother as gods besides Allah?’ He will say, ‘Glory be to You! It was not for me to say what I have no right to say. If I had said so, You would know it. You know what is within me and I do not know what is within You. Verily, You alone know the Unseen. I said nothing but what You commanded me, to worship Allah, my Lord and your Lord. I was a witness for as long as I was with them, but when You took me it was You who watched over them. You are a witness over all things. If You punish them, then they are Your servants. And if You forgive them, then You are the Almighty, the Wise.’<sup>106</sup>*

To be sure, in this passage Jesus عليه السلام leaves open the possibility that those who wrongly but mistakenly deified him might be forgiven for their sins. Allah forgives people for their honest mistakes. But if we are granted knowledge and insight of how the religion was really meant to be, will we still have an excuse if we turn our backs to it?

Exaggeration in religion is not restricted to Christians. Muslims have obviously experienced their own manifestations of extremism, sectarianism, and unauthorized changes to the true religion. The Prophet ﷺ warned Muslims of this by citing Christians as an example, “Do not exaggerate my praises as the Christians have done with the son of Mary. Verily, I am only a servant, so refer to me as the servant of Allah and His messenger.”<sup>107</sup> For this reason, Muslims should not make religious pictures, statues, or icons of prophets, angels, saints, or any other created being, because iconography can eventually lead to idolatry.

## The Crucifixion and Resurrection

The Passion narrative (Latin *passionem* for “suffering, enduring”) is the central climax of the orthodox Gospels, recounting the final moments of Jesus عليه السلام on

<sup>106</sup> The Qur’ān, Sūrat al-Mā’idah 5:116-118.

<sup>107</sup> al-Buhārī, *Sahīh al-Bukhārī*, 4:167 #3445, *bab qawl Allah ta’ala wadhkur fil Kitabi Maryam*.

earth which include his arrest, torture, crucifixion, and resurrection. It is said that the incident was the fulfillment of the prophet Isaiah's vision of the suffering servant:

*He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth. By a perversion of justice he was taken away.*<sup>108</sup>

The resurrection is the signature miracle of the story in the Christian tradition; not only did Jesus bring others back to life, he himself was resurrected from the dead. The narrative is woven together with Christian doctrines and interpretations into what amounts to a core tenet of their view of salvation and the claimed divinity of Jesus عليه السلام.

What does the Qur'an say about the Passion of Christ? And to what extent can it be reconciled with the Gospel narrative? The answer to this question revolves around the critical interpretation of a phrase from a single verse.

Allah ﷺ said:

*And for their saying, 'Verily, we killed the Messiah, Jesus, the son of Mary, the messenger of Allah.' They did not kill him, nor did they crucify him, but rather it was made to appear to them (wa ma qataluhu wa ma salabuhu wa lakin shubbiha lahum). Verily, those who disagree over it are in doubt regarding it. They have no knowledge of it but are only following assumptions. They did not kill him, with certainty. Allah raised him up unto Himself, for Allah is ever Mighty, Wise.*<sup>109</sup>

This passage comes in the context of refuting those who were in stubborn disobedience to Allah, who supported killing the prophets, slandered the virgin Mary عليها السلام, and boasted of killing, crucifying, and defeating the Messiah. Allah

<sup>108</sup> Isaiah 53:7-8; Coogan et al., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, 1039.

<sup>109</sup> The Qur'an, Sūrat al-Nisā' 4:157-158.

responds to them by saying, “They did not kill him, nor did they crucify him, but rather it was made to appear to them.” This last phrase *wa lakin shubbiha la hum* is the source of diverging interpretations of Jesus’ final moments. If Jesus عليه السلام was not killed or crucified, what was made to appear to them instead?

There are no authentic reports from the Prophet ﷺ that explain the meaning of this verse, as noted by Abu Hayyan, “The narrators disagree on the modality of the killing and crucifixion. Nothing of that is confirmed from the Messenger of Allah ﷺ except what is indicated by the Qur’an.”<sup>110</sup> The interpretations of the verse proposed by many of the righteous predecessors and later scholars were taken from Christian sources (or *Isra’iliyyat* traditions), which the Prophet ﷺ allowed them to do, as mentioned earlier. This has resulted in a wide range of possible interpretive options, some of which conform to the Gospel narratives and others that contradict them outright.

The opinion adopted by most Qur'an commentators is that Jesus عليه السلام was substituted by someone else; that is, his enemies killed and crucified another person, thinking it was Jesus. The details of these interpretations, such as who exactly was crucified and under what circumstances, are varied and sometimes conflicting.

Abu Layth al-Samarqandi (d. 375 H) narrates a common view that Judas Iscariot, who had betrayed Jesus عليه السلام, was crucified in his place:

*The Jewish leader ordered a man to enter the house, it was said to Judas (or it is said, Tatianos). Then Gabriel, upon him be peace, came and raised Jesus, upon him be peace, up to the heavens. When the man entered the house, they did not find him. Allah cast the likeness of Jesus over him, and when he exited they thought he was Jesus, so they killed and crucified him.*<sup>111</sup>

In this interpretation, it was the man who sold Jesus عليه السلام to his enemies who was crucified in his place. Not only did Allah save His messenger from torture and a

<sup>110</sup> Abū Hayyān, *Al-Baḥr al-Muḥīṭ fī a-Tafsīr* (Bayrūt: Dār al-Fikr, 1992), 4:125 verse 4:157.

<sup>111</sup> Abū al-Layth al-Samarqandī, *Tafsīr al-Samarqandī*, 1:354 verse 4:157.

painful death, but the traitor himself had to endure what he had wished upon another. Al-Tha'labi records a similar version in which it was the Roman soldier named Tatianos who was actually crucified and killed.<sup>112</sup> Either way, the oppressors were punished and not the innocent messenger of Allah.

In another interpretation, it was one of the disciples who offered to be crucified in Jesus' place. A report from Wahb ibn Munabbih expresses this view:

*Jesus came with seventy disciples with him to a house and they were surrounded. When they had entered, Allah cast the image of Jesus over all of them. They said to them, 'You have bewitched us! Present Jesus to us, or else we will kill you all!' Jesus said to his companions, 'Who among you will purchase Paradise with this life today?' A man among them said, 'I will.' He went out to them and said, 'I am Jesus,' and Allah had cast the image of Jesus over him. They took him, killed him, and crucified him.*<sup>113</sup>

In this reading, it was one of the disciples who heroically stepped forward to save his beloved prophet from a gruesome death and humiliation. This mirrors the willingness of Ali ibn Abi Talib رضي الله تعالى عنه to put himself in harm's way to protect Prophet Muhammad عليه وسلم by sleeping in his bed on the night the Quraysh intended to assassinate him.<sup>114</sup> The true disciples of the prophets love their prophet so much that they would readily sacrifice themselves for them.

Some modern authors, such as Rashid Rida, try to substantiate the claim that Judas was crucified by citing the apocryphal and allegedly suppressed *Gospel of Barnabas*, which suggests that the traitor was crucified.<sup>115</sup> The *Gospel of Barnabas*, however, is widely regarded as a blatant forgery written in the Middle

<sup>112</sup> al-Tha'labi, *Al-Kashf wal-Bayān 'an Tafsīr al-Qur'ān* (Bayrut: Dār Ihyā' al-Turāth al-'Arabī, 2002), 3:410 verse 4:157.

<sup>113</sup> al-Tabarī, *Jāmi' al-Bayān 'an Ta'wīl al-Qur'ān*, 9:368 verse 4:157.

<sup>114</sup> Ibn Hishām, *Al-Sīrah al-Nabawīyah* ([al-Qāhirah]: Maktabat wa Maṭba'at Muṣṭafā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī, 1955), 1:482.

<sup>115</sup> Muhammad Rashīd Riḍā, *Tafsīr al-Manār* (al-Qāhirah: al-Hay'ah al-Miṣrīyah al-'Āmmah lil-Kitāb, 1990), 6:17 verse 4:157.

Ages.<sup>116</sup> Other writers have attempted to refute Christian theology by proposing a swoon-theory, that Jesus عليه السلام was placed upon, but did not actually die on, the cross and therefore the Resurrection did not happen; if there is no Resurrection, there can be no Christianity.<sup>117</sup> Although these sources and arguments are atypical and unprecedented, they have enjoyed some popularity because of their polemical utility against Christian missionaries.

Alternatively, Al-Maturidi (d. 333 H) proposes that no one was substituted for Jesus عليه السلام and the claim of his killing and crucifixion was simply a lie spread by his enemies:

*It is possible that the likeness made to appear was the report that he was killed, rather than his image cast upon another who was really killed. That is mentioned in some of the stories, that when they sought him in that house they did not find him and none of them were absent. They said, 'We killed him,' because they said he entered the house and they entered after him and did not find him. That was to inform them of the great signs of his Messengership. They did not like to say that, so they falsely said 'We killed him.' That is what was made to appear to them. And Allah knows best.<sup>118</sup>*

In this view, Jesus عليه السلام was raised up and saved before his enemies had the chance to kill him. They understood that his ascension was a miracle proving that he was really a prophet but they did not want people to know what they had seen. Thus, they simply made up the story that they had killed and crucified Jesus.

In yet another view, Abu Hayyan prefers the opinion that an angel miraculously intervened to save Jesus عليه السلام and they crucified a mirage in his place, thinking it was him:

<sup>116</sup> J.N.J. Kritzinger, "A critical study of the Gospel of Barnabas," *Religion in Southern Africa* 1, no. 1 (1980): 49-65. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24763798>

<sup>117</sup> See for example Ahmed Deedat, *Crucifixion or Cruci-Fiction?* (Riyadh, Saudi Arabia: International Islamic Pub. House, 1997).

<sup>118</sup> al-Māturīdī, *Ta'wīlāt Ahl al-Sunnah: Tafsīr al-Māturīdī* (Bayrūt: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmīyah, 2005), 3:410-411 verse 4:157.

*It is said that his appearance was not cast over anyone. Indeed, the meaning of ‘But it was made to appear to them,’ is that the angel of illusion obscured it to them so as to remain in place of one from their number who was missing. They rushed to crucify that one and the people threw off their suspicion of it. He said, ‘This is Jesus.’ It is befitting for this opinion to be believed regarding His saying, ‘But it was made to appear to them.’ As for the opinion that his likeness was cast over a person, it is not authentically reported from the Messenger of Allah ﷺ such that it can be relied upon. The differences regarding upon whom his image was cast are great.<sup>119</sup>*

Al-Zuhayli, on the other hand, advocates for adherence to the plain wording of the verse (he was *not* killed or crucified) with only minimal extraneous details from *Isra’iliyyat* traditions, “There is no purview to confirm other narrations whose authenticity has not been established. Rather, what they contain of many incompatibilities and contradiction demonstrates doubt in them.”<sup>120</sup>

In any case, the most common interpretation came to be that it was indeed a disciple of Jesus who was crucified in his place, as expressed by Al-Suyuti, “The person killed and crucified was one of Jesus’ companions whom Allah had cast his image over and they thought it was him.”<sup>121</sup> For many Muslims, any version of the substitution-theory is a satisfactory explanation of the verse. But as we have seen, some Muslim scholars have argued that it is problematic, that the substitution-theory originated in heterodox Christian writings which may not have a basis in fact. The story has long been used by Christians to attack Islam for denying the historical crucifixion and the orthodox Gospel narratives, along with their own doctrines of salvation attached to them. Indeed, one of the earliest major proponents of the substitution-theory was John of Damascus, who used the story to

<sup>119</sup> Abū Ḥayyān, *Al-Baḥr al-Muḥīt fī a-Tafsīr*, 4:126 verse 4:157.

<sup>120</sup> Wahbah al-Zuhaylī, *Al-Tafsīr al-Munīr* (Bayrūt: Dār al-Fikr al-Mu’āṣir, 1997), 6:21 verse 4:157.

<sup>121</sup> al-Suyūṭī and Jalāl al-Dīn al-Mahallī, *Tafsīr al-Jalālayn* (al-Qāhirah: Dār al-Hadīth, 2001), 1:131 verse 4:157.

accuse Islam of advocating a variation of the ‘heretical’ Christian doctrine of Docetism.<sup>122</sup>

From a purely grammatical perspective, the verse does not necessitate a substitution. The implied pronoun in the verb *shubbiha* (“was made to appear”) could mean either ‘him’ or ‘it.’ Proponents of the substitution-theory have held that it refers to ‘him,’ the person who was allegedly crucified instead of Jesus عليه السلام, but according to Al-Zamakhshari (d. 538 H):

*If you ask what is the verb ‘appeared’ attributed to? Then if you attribute it to the Messiah, the Messiah would be a likeness but he was not a likeness. If you attribute it to the one killed, then the one killed is not mentioned. I say: It is attributed to the genitive case and it is like your saying ‘they were made to believe it.’<sup>123</sup>*

Although Al-Zamakhshari notes that the pronoun could mean ‘him,’ it would be unusual since that person is not mentioned anywhere in the Qur’anic text. It would be odd for the text to refer to an unidentified person with a pronoun alone, which means it is more likely that the verb means “it (the matter) was made to appear to them.” Al-Baydawi, who accepts a substitution-theory, nevertheless agrees with Al-Zamakhshari that the pronoun may refer to the matter in general and not a specific person.<sup>124</sup>

That said, the substitution-theory is not a mandatory interpretation of the verse in question, since there is nothing authentically related from the Prophet ﷺ to corroborate it. There are other plausible ways, though not necessarily popular, to interpret the verse in a manner that retains key elements of the Gospel narratives.

<sup>122</sup> Todd Lawson, *The Crucifixion and the Qur'an: A Study in the History of Muslim Thought* (New York: Oneworld Publications, 2014), 7-8.

<sup>123</sup> al-Zamakhsharī, *Al-Kashshāf ‘an Haqā’iq Ghawāmiq al-Tanzīl* (Bayrūt: Dār al-Kitāb al-’Arabī, 1986), 1:587 verse 4:157.

<sup>124</sup> al-Baydāqī, *Anwār al-Tanzīl wa Asrār al-Ta’wīl al-Ma’rūf bi Tafsīr al-Baydāqī* (Bayrūt: Dār Ihyā’ al-Turāth al-’Arabī, 1998), 2:108 verse 4:157), 2:108 verse 4:157.

Al-Tabari notes that “another opinion has been narrated by Wahb ibn Munabbih.” This version is much closer to the Gospel narratives; in particular, that Jesus عليه السلام was ready and willing to accept his own death:

*When Allah informed Jesus the son of Mary that he would soon be departing this world, he was disheartened by death and sorely grieved. So he called the disciples for a meal which he had prepared for them. Jesus said, ‘Come to me tonight, for I have a favor to ask of you.’ When they had come together at night, Jesus served them himself. When they had finished eating, Jesus washed their hands and helped them perform their ablutions with his own hands, and he wiped their hands and garments. The disciples regarded this as beneath the master’s dignity and they disapproved, but Jesus said, ‘Anyone who opposes me in what I do tonight is not from me and I am not from him.’*

*So they agreed and Jesus said, ‘As for what I have done for you this night, serving you at a table and washing your hands with my own hands, let that be an example to you. You regard me as the best of you, so let not one among you regard himself as better than the others. Let each one of you offer his life for the others just as I have laid down my life for you. The favor for which I have called you is that you pray earnestly that Allah will extend my term.’*

*When they stood up for prayer, wishing to prolong their earnest supplications, they were overcome by sleep and they were unable to pray. Jesus said, ‘Glory be to Allah! Can you not be patient with me one night and support me?’ They said, ‘We do not know what overcame us. We would stay up in the night for long prayers but tonight we cannot help but sleep. Whatever supplication we wish to make, we are prevented from saying it.’ Then Jesus said, ‘The shepherd will be taken away and the sheep will be scattered.’*

*And Jesus continued to lament his end. He said, 'In truth, I say to you, one of you will deny me three times before the rooster crows, and another will sell me for a few pieces of silver and consume my price.' After this, they went out, each his own way, and they left him. The Jews then came seeking him and they seized Simon, saying, 'He is one of his companions!' but he denied it, saying, 'I am not his companion!' Others also seized him and he again denied. Then he heard the crowing of a rooster, and he wept bitterly.*

*The next morning one of the disciples went to the Jews and he said, 'What will you give me if I lead you to the Christ?' They gave him thirty pieces, which he took and led them to Jesus. Before that it had been made to appear to them. Thus, they seized him, fettered him, and tied him with a rope and they dragged him, saying, 'You raised the dead and cast out Satan and healed those who were possessed! Can you not save yourself from this rope?' They spat on him and placed thorns upon his head until they brought him to the piece of wood upon which they wished to crucify him, but Allah raised him up to Himself and they crucified what was made to appear for them.*

*He remained for seven hours and his mother and the woman whom Jesus cured from madness came to weep in the place of the crucifixion. Jesus came to them and said, 'For whom do you weep?' They said, 'For you!' Jesus said, 'Verily, Allah has raised me unto Himself and nothing befell me except goodness, for this is something which was made to appear to them. Go now and tell the disciples to meet me at such-and-such place.' There were eleven who met him and the disciple who sold him and led the Jews to him was missing. Jesus asked his companions about him and they said, 'He regretted what he did, so he hanged himself.' Jesus said, 'Had he repented, Allah would surely have turned toward him.'*<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> al-Tabarī, *Jāmi‘ al-Bayān ‘an Ta’wīl al-Qur’ān* (Bayrūt: Mu’assasat al-Risālah, 2000), 9:368-369 verse 4:157.

It is unclear from the text of this report exactly who or what was crucified instead of Jesus عليه السلام. It does not explicitly mention a companion coming forward to volunteer, nor was it Judas who committed suicide after the crucifixion took place, and neither did Jesus ask anyone to suffer in his place. Yet he accepted his impending death and was willing to sacrifice himself to save his disciples.

Al-Tabari combines this longer report with the shorter report from Wahb cited earlier, and he concludes that it was a companion who took his place. He also makes an important point about the disciples:

*The matter of Jesus was hidden from them, he was raised up, and the one killed was changed into his image after his companions fled. They had heard Jesus in the night announce his death and lament because he had thought his death had been revealed. They related what occurred to them as the truth, yet the matter with Allah in reality was different from what they related, so those who related it among the disciples do not deserve to be accused of lying, as what they related appeared outwardly as the truth.<sup>126</sup>*

In Al-Tabari's interpretation, Jesus عليه السلام had come to accept that his death was inevitable, an incident known as the Agony in the Garden of Gethsemane, but he was miraculously saved from it before he could be put on the cross. The disciples thought that Jesus really had been crucified, yet Al-Tabari absolves them from any blame for believing and sharing what they saw. In this telling, some elements of the Gospel narrative are kept consistent with the Qur'an, but the actual historical event is considered to be something Allah had obscured, only to be revealed later.

The incident of the Agony has important moral implications that should not be forgotten. The archetype of self-sacrifice and peaceful martyrdom exists in Islam as well. The son of Adam said to his brother before he was murdered, "If you raise your hand to kill me, I will not raise my hand to kill you. Verily, I fear Allah, the Lord of the worlds."<sup>127</sup> Likewise, it is said that Jesus عليه السلام prohibited his disciples

<sup>126</sup> al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘ al-Bayān ‘an Ta’wīl al-Qur’ān*, 9:375 verse 4:157.

<sup>127</sup> The Qur'an, Sūrat al-Mā'idah 5:28.

from defending him against his enemies, saying to them, “Put your sword back into its place; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword.”<sup>128</sup>

Self-defense is certainly an inherent legal and human right, but sometimes circumstances call for sacrificing oneself for the greater good. Like Jesus عليه السلام in the Gospel narrative, the third Caliph Uthman ibn Affan رضي الله تعالى عنه also willingly allowed himself to be killed to save his companions. Al-Hajjaj once gave a sermon, saying, “Verily, the example of Uthman to Allah is like the example of Jesus son of Mary.”<sup>129</sup> How was the death of Uthman رضي الله تعالى عنه similar to that of Jesus عليه السلام?

Abu Hurayrah tells us that when Uthman رضي الله تعالى عنه was being threatened by his political enemies, he came ready to fight in defense of his Caliph. Uthman told him to stand down, fearing it would cause more unnecessary bloodshed:

*I entered the house of Uthman on the day he was under siege and I said, “O leader of the believers, I have come to give support or fight.” Uthman said, “O Abu Hurayrah, would it please you to ‘kill the people altogether’ (5:32) including me?” I said no. Uthman said, “By Allah, if you have killed one man, then it is as if you have killed all the people.” So I returned and I did not fight.<sup>130</sup>*

They broke into the house of Uthman رضي الله تعالى عنه and killed him right there, but an all-out fight was avoided and Abu Hurayrah رضي الله تعالى عنه was spared. Abu Salih said, “When Abu Hurayrah was told about what happened to Uthman, he wept profusely. It is as if I can still hear him wailing.”<sup>131</sup>

Abu Hurayrah رضي الله تعالى عنه was the most prolific narrator of prophetic sayings (*hadith*). Because of Uthman’s sacrifice, he went on to live and continue narrating statements from the Prophet ﷺ that we read and benefit from today. From this

<sup>128</sup> Matthew 26:52; Coogan et al., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, 1786.

<sup>129</sup> Abū Dāwūd, *Sunan Abī Dāwūd* (Şaydā, Lubnān: al-Maktabah al-Asrīyah, 1980), 4:209 #4641, *kitab al-Sunnah bab fi al-Khulafa’*.

<sup>130</sup> Sa’īd ibn Mansūr, *Sunan Sa’īd ibn Mansūr* (al-Hind: al-Dār al-Salafiyah, 1982), 2:386 #2937; declared “authentic” (*sahīh*) by Ahmad Shakir in ‘*Umdat Al-Tafsīr ’an Ibn Kathīr* (Miṣr: Dār al-Wafā’, 2005), 1:666 verse 5:32.

<sup>131</sup> Ibn Sa’īd, *Al-Tabaqāt al-Kubrā* (Bayrūt: Dār al-Kutub al-’Ilmiyah, 1990), 3:59.

perspective, the cross of the Gospel narrative, then, was not intended to be a symbol of Jesus' divinity, but is instead an expression of the archetype of selfless martyrdom that believers must aspire to, as Jesus told his disciples, "Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple."<sup>132</sup> So we need to ask ourselves, would we be willing to be crucified or killed for the sake of our faith, like the companion Khubayb ibn 'Adi رضي الله تعالى عنه who chose to be crucified by the Meccans while defending the Prophet Muhammad صلى الله عليه وسلم؟ Like Uthman رضي الله تعالى عنه, would we readily lay down our lives for the greater good and to protect our loved ones?

Another interpretation, which is not popular with classical scholars, is that the statement in the verse "they did not kill him, nor crucify him" is not a literal *historical* statement, but rather an esoteric *theological* statement. Ibn Kathir notes that some Christians interpret "it was made to appear to them" to mean that "the Messiah came to Mary while she was sitting and weeping at the cross. He saw her in the place where his body (*jasad*) was nailed and he told her that his spirit (*ruh*) had been raised while his body was crucified."<sup>133</sup> Ibn Kathir vehemently denounces this interpretation probably because it came directly from Christians who claimed that Jesus عليه السلام was divine. Al-Baydawi likewise records, and also rejects, the interpretation that "his humanity (*nasut*) was crucified but his divinity (*lahut*) was raised."<sup>134</sup> This latter wording, which implies the divinity of Jesus, is unacceptable to Muslims, of course. But if merely the body of Jesus was crucified (or appeared to be crucified) while his soul was raised up and protected, that in itself does not mean he was God in the flesh. It means he was not truly crucified or killed by the power of men, rather only in a purely superficial sense that it appeared so outwardly. According to one report from Wahb, "Allah caused him to die for three days, then resurrected him, and then ascended him."<sup>135</sup> His enemies did not kill or crucify him because it was Allah who caused his apparent bodily death; it was part of the divine plan so that the signature miracle of the Resurrection would be fulfilled. Understood in this way, it may be possible to fully reconcile the Qur'an,

<sup>132</sup> Luke 14:27; Coogan et al., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, 1858.

<sup>133</sup> Ibn Kathīr, *Al-Bidāyah wal-Nihāyah* (al-Qāhirah: Dār Hajar, 1997), 2:514.

<sup>134</sup> al-Baydā' wī, *Anwār al-Tanzīl wa Asrār al-Ta'wil al-Ma'rūf bi Tafsīr al-Baydā' wī*, 2:108 verse 4:157.

<sup>135</sup> Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-'Azīm*, 2:39 verse 3:55.

the Gospel narratives, the signature miracle of the Resurrection, and the historical record without claiming divinity for Jesus or setting one source against another.<sup>136</sup>

Finally, there is a significant moral teaching embedded in the crucifixion narrative that readily transfers to Islam. Jesus عليه السلام is said to have refused to condemn the people who were torturing him in ignorance, but rather he asked Allah to forgive them, “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.”<sup>137</sup> Prophet Muhammad ﷺ was inspired by this example and he often told his companions about it. According to Abdullah ibn Mas’ud رضي الله تعالى عنه, “I remember seeing the Messenger of Allah ﷺ tell the story of a prophet who was beaten by his people and he wiped the blood from his face, saying, ‘My Lord, forgive my people for they do not know.’”<sup>138</sup> Furthermore, the Prophet ﷺ himself put this example of Jesus عليه السلام into practice. Imam Muslim records this story in his chapter on the battle of Uhud, because the Prophet ﷺ made the same supplication for his people when they were trying to kill him. As said by Abu Hatim, “The Prophet said this supplication during the battle of Uhud when they slashed his face.”<sup>139</sup> Even if the crucifixion story is rejected, Muslims can and should still accept this moral example of mercy towards their enemies.

In summary, most Muslim scholars accept a variant of the substitution-theory, that someone other than Jesus عليه السلام was crucified in his place. Many Muslims will find this explanation satisfactory and have no need to investigate further. However, there are other plausible interpretations of the verse that more closely coincide with the Gospel narratives, the historical crucifixion, and the Qur'an. All of the diverging interpretations of the verse 4:157 are simply opinions derived from extracanonical sources, as there is nothing authentic from the Prophet ﷺ to substantiate any of them. It is not necessary, as a matter of creed, for a Muslim to accept one of these opinions over the other, although most Muslims will find it safest to follow the majority interpretation. Rather, it is only required for Muslims

<sup>136</sup> Mahmoud M. Ayoub, "Towards an Islamic Christology, II: the Death of Jesus, Reality or Delusion." *The Muslim World*. 70.2 (1980): 91-121, 117.

<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1478-1913.1980.tb03405.x>

<sup>137</sup> Luke 23:34; Coogan et al., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, 1874-1875.

<sup>138</sup> Muslim, *Sahīḥ Muslim*, 3:1417 #1792, *kitab al-Jihad wal Siyar bab ghazwah Uhud*.

<sup>139</sup> Ibn Ḥibbān, *Sahīḥ Ibn Ḥibbān* (Bayrūt: Mu’assasat al-Risālah, 1993), 3:254 #973, *bab al-ad’iyyah ma yajib al-mar’ā al-dua’ ‘ala a’lā daihi*.

to believe in Jesus عليه السلام as the Messiah, carrier of the Gospel, born of the virgin Mary عليهما السلام, the word and the spirit from Allah, a human prophet and a great messenger of Allah, and that the Qur'anic statement “they did not kill him, nor did they crucify him” is the truth.

## Ascension to Heaven and Second Coming

Regardless of how the final moments of Jesus عليه السلام are interpreted, Muslims generally agree that he left this world alive in a miracle called the Ascension. Allah raised him to heaven where he now remains, alive and well, until he will descend near the end of time in the Second Coming. He will return to defeat the False Messiah (*al-Masih al-Dajjal*) and renew the truth faith, after which he will die a natural death.

Allah ﷺ said:

*As Allah said, ‘O Jesus, I will take you and raise you unto Myself, purify you from those who disbelieve, and make those who follow you greater than those who disbelieve until the Day of Resurrection. Then unto Me will you return, and I will judge between you over your differences.’<sup>140</sup>*

The righteous predecessors disagreed over the meaning of the phrase “I will take you” in this verse, because the verb *tawaffa* is also a euphemism for death (like saying someone ‘passed away’). One group of scholars said that Jesus عليه السلام was raised up in his sleep, such as Al-Rabia’, “It means taking during sleep. Allah raised him while he was sleeping.” Another group said “take” means to “receive,” so Allah took him up alive. Al-Tabari explains, “It means I will receive you from the earth unto My hosts, and take you to a place with Me without death.”<sup>141</sup>

<sup>140</sup> The Qur'an, Sūrat Āli ‘Imrān 3:55.

<sup>141</sup> al-Tabarī, *Jāmi‘ al-Bayān ‘an Ta’wīl al-Qur’ān*, 6:455-6 verse 3:55.

A third group said that the word “take” here really is a euphemism for death. Ibn Abbas reportedly explained “I will take you” as “I will cause you die,” as well as another report from Wahb, “Allah made Jesus the son of Mary pass away for three hours of the day until He raised him up to Himself.”<sup>142</sup> This interpretation seems to implicitly accept that the miracle of the Resurrection occurred, since it is agreed upon that Jesus عليه السلام ascended to heaven alive. However, it could be said that he died a natural death, not by crucifixion, and was brought back to life and raised to heaven.

In any case, Al-Tabari prefers the interpretation that Jesus was “received” by Allah alive, without dying, because of “the unanimous reports from the Messenger of Allah عليه وسلم that Jesus the son of Mary will descend and kill the False Messiah... then he will die and the Muslims will pray over him and bury him.”<sup>143</sup> Whether Jesus عليه السلام was raised in his sleep, or he was raised up alive, or he died and was resurrected, it is agreed upon that he is now alive in heaven and waiting to return.

The Prophet ﷺ describes the event as follows:

*By Allah, the son of Mary will descend as a just ruler. He will abolish the cross, kill the swine, and annul the tribute, but he will leave the she-camel such that no one collects from it. He will cause rancor, hatred, and envy to disappear, and he will call people to give their wealth in charity but no one will need it.*<sup>144</sup>

In another narration, the Prophet ﷺ told us that Jesus عليه السلام will defer to the Muslim prayer leader at the time, as an indication that he will come to fulfill the teachings of the Qur'an and Sunnah:

*Jesus the son of Mary, upon him be peace, will descend and the leader will invite him to lead the prayer but he will say, ‘No, some of you are leaders over others and this is an honor for this nation.’*<sup>145</sup>

<sup>142</sup> al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘ al-Bayān ‘an Ta’wīl al-Qur’ān*, 6:457 verse 3:55.

<sup>143</sup> al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘ al-Bayān ‘an Ta’wīl al-Qur’ān*, 6:458 verse 3:55.

<sup>144</sup> Muslim, *Sahīḥ Muslim*, 1:136 #155, *kitab al-Iman bab nuzul ‘Isa ibn Maryam*.

<sup>145</sup> Muslim, *Sahīḥ Muslim*, 1:137 #156, *kitab al-Iman bab nuzul ‘Isa ibn Maryam*.

The second coming of Jesus عليه السلام will be characterized by the return of justice to the world after a period of great injustice and oppression at the hands of the False Messiah and his allies. He will be preceded by a righteous Muslim leader, sometimes referred to as *Al-Mahdi* (“the guided one”), much in the same way he was first preceded by John the Baptist. Jesus will renew the true religion once again before the end of time and the Day of Judgment arrive; the true kingdom of God will be re-established on earth.

Jesus عليه السلام will abolish the cross (literally ‘break’ the cross) because now that he has returned, he has the right to correct all of the false beliefs spread in his name. Even some Christians themselves believe crucifixes with the image of a man on them are prohibited as ‘graven images’ according to the Torah, “You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.”<sup>146</sup> That said, it is not the right of Muslims to break the cross, but only Jesus after he returns, since the practice of Christianity is protected by Islamic law.

Additionally, Jesus’ message of love for the neighbor will prevail until rancor, hatred, and envy disappear between people. Jesus عليه السلام will also abolish any tribute because, since all people are witness to him as a living miracle, they will have no choice but to believe in him. As mentioned earlier, when people are given unmistakable signs from Allah, they are required to believe in them.

The Second Coming is part of the branch of Islamic theology known as *eschatology*. It is easy for people to be misled on these issues if they do not know why they were revealed in the first place, or how they can be understood consistently with the rest of the religion’s teachings. Only Allah knows exactly how and when these signs will appear, as “Allah alone has knowledge of the Hour.”<sup>147</sup> Some people try to construct a precise timeline from the plethora of reports on this topic, many of which are of dubious authenticity or open to diverging interpretations; they might even imagine they can or should do some

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<sup>146</sup> Exodus 20:4; Coogan et al., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, 110.

<sup>147</sup> The Qur’ān, Sūrat Luqmān 31:34.

things to speed up the end of the world. Such efforts are futile and fruitless, as the specifics of the Unseen are known only to Allah.

Rather, the Prophet ﷺ stated his reasoning for informing us about signs of the end-times:

*Hasten to perform good deeds before seven events: Are you waiting for poverty that makes you forgetful? Or wealth that burdens you? Or a debilitating disease or senility? Or an unexpected death or the False Messiah? Or is it evil in the unseen you are waiting for? Or the Hour itself? The Hour will be bitter and terrible.*<sup>148</sup>

Belief in the Second Coming and other signs before the Last Day does not mean we should just wait for Jesus عليه السلام or the next great Caliph to come solve our problems. Rather, we should “hasten to perform good deeds” when we are alive, healthy, and able, because times of peace, stability, and safety will not last forever and we should not take them for granted. As stated by Al-’Ala’i, “The purpose of these reports is to encourage initiative in performing good deeds before our end and to make the most of our time before disaster strikes.”<sup>149</sup>

## Conclusion

It may be that no religious figure in history has been honored and revered by so many human beings as Jesus Christ عليه السلام. The theological, moral, and narrative elements of his life serve as an important basis for dialogue between Muslims and Christians, particularly his teaching to love God and to love one’s neighbor as oneself. After all, if all Muslims and Christians truly and sincerely loved good for their neighbors as Allah has commanded through His messengers, the world would be a better place for everyone.

<sup>148</sup> al-Tirmidhī, *Sunan al-Tirmidhī*, 4:128 #2306; declared fair (*hasan*) by Al-Tirmidhī in the commentary.

<sup>149</sup> al-Munāwī, *Fayd al-Qadīr: Sharḥ al-Jāmi ‘al-Ṣaghīr* (Miṣr [Cairo]: al-Maktabah al-Tijārīyah al-Kubrā, 1938), 3:195.

That said, there are real religious differences between Muslims and Christians that cannot be ignored or downplayed. At the heart of the disagreement is what Allah requires from us to achieve salvation in the next life. These disagreements, nevertheless, do not preclude Muslims and Christians from living together in peace and cooperating on mutually beneficial activities for the betterment of humankind.

*Success comes from Allah, and Allah knows best.*