

## **For they killed him not: A Muslim portrayal of Jesus**

by

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There can be no doubt that Jesus<sup>1</sup> is one of the most significant personalities of our time: After all, our calendar in the modern era is based on the date of his birth. Yet, opinions differ as to who Jesus really was. The claims range from a secular denial of his existence as an historic person, on the one hand, to his elevation by Christians as the embodiment of the divine, on the other. Muslims regard him as one of God's prophets and agree with Christians that he is the promised Messiah, whereas Jews reject him as an impostor.

According to Jewish teachings, the Messiah must be from the tribe of Judah, and to do so he must have a biological father from within this tribe, whereas for Christians and Muslims it is an essential part of their faith that Mary was a virgin when she gave birth to him. Does it matter? Those three Abrahamic faiths, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, together with secular humanism, remain the key players in the value systems of the developed world dominating the current world order. Their relationship to each other has a direct bearing on the course of political events. A better understanding of their different views of Jesus might, therefore, lead to a better chance for successful communication between the followers of those groups. By presenting the Muslim view of Jesus, or the Arabic equivalent 'Isa by which he is referred to in the Qur'an, we hope to contribute to such a noble aim.

Muslims believe in Jesus and the revelation given to him, as they believe in many other Biblical prophets and their revelations:

*"Say (O Muhammad): We believe in Allah and that which is revealed to us and that which was revealed to Abraham and Ishmael and Isaac and Jacob and the tribes, and that which was entrusted to Moses and Jesus and the prophets from their Lord. We make no distinction between any of them, and to Him we have surrendered." (Qur'an chapter 3, verse 84).*

So, Muslims recognise Jesus as a true prophet from Allah, but what do they believe about him? The key aspects in this presentation of the Muslim portrayal of Jesus are: His virgin birth, his prophet hood, his miracles, his mission, his ascension (as opposed to his alleged crucifixion), and his second coming as the Messiah.

### **Jesus virgin birth**

Jesus' creation is a miracle in itself, but it is not the only of its kind. Jesus was created from only a female, without a biological father. Adam, the ancestor of all mankind, was created from neither male nor female by the sheer command of God. Eve, Adam's wife, was created from only the male, without a biological mother. With the rest of humans originating from both a male and a female through normal procreation, we thus have four distinct types of creation.

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<sup>1</sup> In Muslim practice, whenever the name of one of God's prophets is mentioned, it is followed by the pious invocation "peace be with him". Readers are encouraged to observe this etiquette, but for reasons of readability, the repeated insertion of this formula is being omitted in the text.

*"The likeness of Jesus is as the likeness of Adam. He created him from dust, then He said to him: Be! and he is." (Qur'an chapter 3, verse 59).*

The rarity of a miraculous birth meant, of course, that it was difficult, if not impossible, for people to accept. Mary was born into the devout and respected household of Levites, the Jewish tribe which was given the honour of raising their religious leaders. She was brought up and looked after by Zachariah, a pious man of high standing. To be with child without having been married was unspeakable.

Mary herself found it hard to believe when she was told by the angel Gabriel, also referred to as the Holy Spirit, that she was going to give birth to a son. "She said: My Lord! How can I have a child when no mortal has touched me?

*He said: So (it will be). Allah creates what he will. If He decrees a thing, He says to it only: Be! and it is." (Qur'an chapter 3, verse 47).*

To avoid being questioned and bringing shame upon her family, she leaves:

*"And she conceived him, and she withdrew with him to a far place." (Qur'an chapter 19, verse 22).*

When about to give birth, she is still troubled with the thought of having to present a child to her people without having been married:

*"And the pangs of childbirth drove her to the trunk of the palm-tree. She said: Oh, would that I had died before this and had become a thing of nothing, forgotten!" (Qur'an chapter 19, verse 23).*

She decides to observe a fast from speaking to avoid being challenged:

*"Then she brought him to her own people, carrying him They said: O Mary! You have come with an amazing thing. O sister of Aaron! Your father was not a wicked man nor was your mother a harlot. Then she pointed to him. They said: How can we talk to one who is in the cradle, a young boy?" (Qur'an chapter 19, verses 27-29).*

Jesus' miraculous birth is followed by other miracles from the moment he was born. As his mother points at him in the midst of her people's allegations,

*"He spoke: I am the slave of Allah. He has given me the Scripture and has appointed me as a prophet." (Qur'an chapter 19, verse 30).*

When confronted with such miracles, many people ascribed them to Jesus in person instead of to the greater power of God, who had given him those signs. They associated divinity directly with Jesus, whereas Jesus himself only ever claimed to have been a true servant and prophet of God.

### Jesus, the prophet of Allah

On account of his miraculous birth and the numerous miracles he worked during his time on earth, Christians have, after the Council of Nicea in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, given Jesus divine status and made him a part of the godhead, although such claims are in no way supported by Jesus' own teachings. With the trinity and the Passion Play as a story of God dying and rising again to life, Christianity has merged with ancient mythology and reinterpreted the life of Jesus as a variation of the Babylonian story of Baal about one millennium before his birth. The Qur'an unambiguously repudiates this interpretation and gives the following admonition to the Christians:

*"O people of the scripture! Do not exaggerate in your religion nor utter anything concerning Allah except the truth. The Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, was only a messenger of Allah, and His word, which He conveyed to Mary, and a spirit from Him. So – believe in Allah and His messengers, and say not 'Three'. Cease, (it is) better for you! Allah is only One God. Far removed it is from His Majesty that He should have a son."* (Qur'an chapter 4, verse 171).

It is true that the Bible uses the term son of God, but it does not reserve this title for Jesus alone. Nobody would suggest that Matthew 5.9, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God", bestows divinity on all those who meet this criterion. Throughout the New Testament Jesus prefers to refer to himself as the "son of man". A misreading of the term "son of God" and a misunderstanding of how Jesus was taken from this earth resulted in a doctrine which is in contradiction to his own teachings. In Matthew 10.40 Jesus makes as clear a distinction between himself and God as he makes between his disciples and himself: "He who receives you receives me, and he who receives me receives Him Who sent me." "One who is sent" is the literal translation of the Arabic word for messenger or prophet. Jesus never claimed to have been any more than just that.

*"When Allah says: O Jesus, son of Mary! Did you say to mankind: Take me and my mother for two gods besides Allah? he says: Be glorified! It was not for me to utter that to which I had no right."* (Qur'an chapter 5, verse 116).

An earlier verse states clearly:

*"The Messiah, son of Mary, was no other than a messenger, messengers (the like of whom) had passed away before him. And his mother was a saintly woman. And they both used to eat (earthly) food. See how We make the revelations clear for them, and see how they are turned away!"* (Qur'an chapter 5, verse 75).

### The miracles of Jesus

God sent many messengers to guide people at different times in history. In essence, they all brought the same message, yet each of them was unique. "Of those messengers, some of whom We have caused to excel others, and of whom there are some to whom Allah spoke, while some of them He exalted (above others) in degree; and We gave Jesus, son of Mary, clear proofs (of Allah's sovereignty) and We supported him with the holy Spirit." (Qur'an chapter 2, verse 253). Amongst those clear proofs with which God supported the prophethood of Jesus were some most amazing miracles. "When Allah says: O Jesus, son of Mary! Remember my favour to you and to your mother; how I strengthened you with the holy Spirit, so that you spoke to mankind in the cradle as in maturity; and how I taught you the Scripture and Wisdom and the Torah and the Gospel; and how you did shape of clay as it were the likeness of a bird by My permission, and did blow upon it and it was a bird by My permission, and you did heal him who was born blind and the leper by My permission; and how you did raise the dead by My permission: and how I restrained the Children of Israel from (harming) you when you came to them with clear proofs, and those of them who disbelieved exclaimed: This is nothing else than mere magic." (Qur'an chapter 5, verse 110). Just as some saw these miracles as manifestations of magic, others saw in them a sign of Jesus' divinity; yet, all of these miracles he was only able to perform by the permission of God.

Some evangelists claim that the fact that Jesus and his miracles are given such prominence in the Qur'an is an admission that his mission was universal and of greater significance than that of any other prophet. This is an intentional

misreading of the Qur'an, which describes him specifically as a messenger to the Children of Israel.

#### The mission, with which Jesus was sent

The Qur'an is not alone in this characterisation of Jesus' mission. According to Matthew 15.24 Jesus was "sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" and had no pretensions at being a universal prophet. He is an important prophet and link in the chain of prophets to be sealed, or completed, by the final prophet Muhammad. As the Qur'an puts it:

*"And when Jesus son of Mary said: O Children of Israel! I am a messenger of Allah to you, confirming that which was (revealed) before me in the Torah and bringing good tidings of a messenger who comes after me, whose name is the Praised One." (Qur'an chapter 61, verse 6).*

This "Praised One", or "Ahmed" in Arabic, is the same as the Greek "Periklytos" which appears in the gospel of John 14.16-17, where it is usually translated with "Counsellor" or "Comforter", an equivalent to the Greek "Parakletos". In John 16.1-15 we hear Jesus explaining to his disciples that he will have to leave them, so that this Counsellor, the next prophet in line, can be sent.

Jesus thus, whilst being the Messiah, is not the final prophet to all mankind, a position reserved for Muhammad. Jesus is an Israelite prophet reforming the corrupted teachings of the Jewish Pharisees.

*"And (He) will make him a messenger to the Children of Israel, (saying): I come to you with a sign from your Lord. I fashion for you out of clay the likeness of a bird, and I breathe into it and it is a bird, by Allah's permission. I heal him who was born blind, and the leper, and I raise the dead, by Allah's permission. And I announce to you what you eat and what you store up in your houses. In this verily is a sign for you, if you are to be believers. And (I come) confirming that which was before me of the Torah, and to make lawful some of that which was forbidden to you. I come to you with a sign from your Lord, so keep your duty to Allah and obey me. Allah is my Lord and your Lord, so worship Him. That is a straight path." (Qur'an chapter 3, 49-51).*

Or as the Bible puts it in Matthew 5.17-19: "Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfil them." With the exception of some relaxations to the Rabbinical law, Jesus upheld the teachings of the Torah. In fact, he denounced them for not doing so themselves:

*"Those of the Children of Israel who went astray were cursed by the tongue of David, and of Jesus, son of Mary. That was because they rebelled and used to transgress." (Qur'an chapter 5, verse 78).*

Because the Jews rejected Jesus, God made his teachings succeed theirs and made his disciples gain the upper hand:

*"O you who believe! Be Allah's helpers, even as Jesus son of Mary said to the disciples: Who are my helpers for Allah? They said: We are Allah's helpers. And a party of the Children of Israel believed, while a party disbelieved. Then We strengthened those who believed against their enemy, and they became the uppermost." (Qur'an chapter 61, verse 14).*

Jesus chose his disciples to continue the teaching of his message after him. For them his message was a call to the worship of the one and only God of the Ten Commandments: "I am the Lord, your god... You shall have no other gods before

me", or in Hosea 13.4: "I am the Lord your God from the land of Egypt: you know no god but Me, and besides Me there is no saviour". His teaching is given in the narrative of the Qur'an:

*"They surely disbelieve who say: Allah is the Messiah, son of Mary. The Messiah (himself) said: O Children of Israel, worship Allah, my Lord and your Lord. Who ascribes partners to Allah, for him Allah has forbidden paradise. His abode is the Fire. For evil-doers there will be no helpers." (Qur'an chapter 5, verse 72). It is only after Jesus leaves this world that the teachings of Christianity and Islam begin to diverge.*

#### "For they killed him not": Jesus' ascent to heaven

Just as Jesus' entry into this world was miraculous, his departure from this world was equally so. Instead of dying a natural death, he was raised to heaven and saved from those who plotted against him.

*"(And remember) when Allah said: O Jesus! I am gathering you and causing you to ascend to Me, and am cleansing you of those who disbelieve and am setting those who follow you above those who disbelieve until the Day of Resurrection. Then to Me you will (all) return, and I shall judge between you as to that in which you used to differ." (Qur'an chapter 3, verse 55).*

And:

*"But Allah took him up to Himself. Allah is ever Mighty, Wise." (Qur'an chapter 4, verse 158).*

Christians do not deny Jesus' ascension, but believe it followed his crucifixion. They teach that he rose from the dead and then was raised to God, and they see this as his greatest miracle and proof of divinity. Jesus' alleged crucifixion is probably the biggest issue of contention between Christians and Muslims. The crucifixion has also been the source of enmity between Christians and Jews because Jesus was allegedly put to death on the behest of the Jewish elders.

The key Christian doctrine is that by sacrificing His own son, God redeemed the world of sin. According to the old testament, crucifixion was a humiliating death reserved for those who were cursed. In his letter to the Galatians Paul explains that everybody is cursed under the law of God, because no-one can fully keep it, but that by taking this curse upon himself Jesus has freed the world from the curse of the law. Christians, therefore, replace the requirement of keeping the law with the need to love Jesus who sacrificed himself for them. This is, of course, in contradiction to Jesus' own teaching mentioned earlier that he had not come to abolish the law, but to fulfil it.

There are other contradictions in this doctrine. The idea that God punished His innocent son to free mankind from inherited sin violates the rule set out in Deuteronomy 24.16: "The fathers shall not be put to death for the children, nor shall the children be put to death for the fathers, every man shall be put to death for his own sin." The same is expressed in the Qur'an:

*"No soul shall bear another's burden." (Qur'an chapter 6, verse 164).*

In trying to show that God knows no limits in His attempt to forgive and redeem mankind, Christian theologians have Him break His own laws and punish the innocent in order to save the guilty. A truly loving God does not need this kind of inequity in order to be forgiving.

From the Muslim point of view, the crucifixion never took place:

*"...they killed him not nor crucified him, but it appeared so to them; and those who disagree concerning it are in doubt of it; they have no knowledge of it except pursuit of a conjecture; they killed him not for certain." (Qur'an chapter 4, verse 157).*

Some commentators explain the phrase "but it appeared so to them" as meaning that some other person, maybe Judas who had betrayed him, was put on the cross instead in a case of mistaken identity.

According to the teachings of Islam, Jesus did not die and then rise again from the dead. He was saved the humiliating death of crucifixion by God Who made him ascend to Himself. He remains in the presence of God until the time when he will have to complete his task: to return as the Messiah or Christ near the end of time.

### The return of the Messiah

The second coming of Christ is another shared belief between Christians and Muslims, which is rejected by Jews because he does not fulfil their criteria for being the promised Messiah. Other than referring to Jesus as the Messiah, the Qur'an does not say much about this second coming. The only reference to be found is the statement:

*"There is not one of the People of the Scripture but will believe in him before his death, and on the Day of Resurrection he will be a witness against them." (Qur'an chapter 4, verse 159).*

"People of the Scripture" is a term used in the Qur'an to describe the Jews and Christians, and as they are obviously not in agreement in their beliefs about Jesus, commentators understand that the unanimous belief in him "before his death" is a reference to his second coming which will leave no more room for doubt about him.

Islamic beliefs about the return of Jesus as the Messiah are mainly based on a number of sayings of the prophet Muhammad (Ahadith), which deal with the events near the end of time. Those traditions inform us that Jesus himself will interfere in the confrontation between the Mahdi, the leader of the Muslims who will unite them after their earlier defeats, and the Dajjal, the Anti-Christ. Jesus will descend on the shoulders of two angels near Damascus and join the Mahdi in prayer, thereby affirming his allegiance to and following of the prophet Muhammad and his teachings. He will pursue the Anti-Christ and kill him, putting an end to all wars. He will reign for forty years in an era of peace and complete happiness. He will break the cross, removing the falsehoods which were circulated about him, and restore the pure teachings he originally had come with. He will perform the pilgrimage (Hajj), will marry, and will have children, and will eventually die a natural death and be buried next to Muhammad, the final prophet.

In this sense, Jesus is the saviour also for Muslims. They look to him to challenge the erroneous teachings about his divinity himself. They wait for him to confront and defeat the anti-Christ. They know that religious differences will persist until he returns as the Messiah.

### Interfaith relations and tolerance

The Muslim understanding of Jesus differs in many respects from that of Christians, Jews, or secularists. At the same time there are many commonalities. Whilst these different positions could be seen as a source of conflict, the Muslim position actually aids mutual respect and tolerance. Islam is categorical about denouncing the trinity as false and the crucifixion as untrue. Yet, the Qur'an also tells Muslims that they must leave the judgement about these differences to God Himself.

*"We gave Jesus, son of Mary, clear proofs (of sovereignty) and We supported him with the holy Spirit. And if Allah had so willed it, those who followed after them would not have fought one with another after the clear proofs had come to them. But they differed, some of them believing and some disbelieving. And if Allah had so willed, they would not have fought one with another; but Allah does what He will." (Qur'an chapter 2, verse 253).*

And:

*"Allah (Himself) is Witness that there is no God except Him. And the angels and the men of learning (too are witness). Maintaining His creation in justice, there is no God except Him, the Almighty, the Wise. Religion with Allah (is) the Surrender (to His Will and Guidance – Islam). Those who (formerly) received the Scripture differed only after knowledge came to them, through transgression among themselves. Who disbelieves the revelations of Allah (will find that) Allah is swift at reckoning. And if they argue with you, (O Muhammad), say: I have surrendered my purpose to Allah and (so have) those who follow me. And say to those who have received the Scripture and those who read not: Have you (too) surrendered? If they surrender, then truly they are rightly guided, and if they turn away, then it is your duty only to convey the message (to them). Allah is Seer of (His) bondsmen." (Qur'an chapter 19, verses 18-20).*

Or:

*"And the Jews say the Christians follow nothing (true), and the Christians say the Jews follow nothing (true); though both are readers of the Scripture. Even thus speak those who know not. Allah will judge between them on the Day of Resurrection concerning that in which they differ." (Qur'an chapter 2, verse 113).*

It is precisely because Muslims are encouraged to leave the final judgement to Allah that churches and synagogues together with their respective communities have survived unharmed in the countries ruled over by Islam for well over a millennium. It is for this reason that the Golden Era of the Jews was under Muslim rule where they were never persecuted as they were in Christian Europe. Due to these teachings Muslims showed tolerance to Jews and Christians when they governed Jerusalem and upheld their right to worship, something that unfortunately can neither be said of the Christians whose relentless persecution of both Jews and Muslims during the crusades put an indelible stain on their history, nor of the Jews who today deny both Muslims and Christians an equal right to exist in the Holy Land.