

JESUS AN ISLAMIC VIEW

Did you know that it is obligatory for Muslims to believe in Jesus, or that a record of Jesus' life and teachings is preserved in the Qur'an and sayings of Muhammad, as well as in little-known traditions handed down by Muslim communities over the centuries?

Christians brought up in the West are often surprised to discover Muslims who are familiar with the life and teachings of Jesus through the teachings and scriptures of Islam, while they themselves are unlikely to have learned anything about the Prophet Muhammad at church. This is partly a matter of history: Islam incorporates the Judeo-Christian tradition and embraces Jesus in the same way that Christianity incorporates the Old Testament and embraces Moses (peace be upon them both). All three religions trace their roots to Abraham, and in fact the Qur'an and the Bible share and uphold many beliefs, practices and virtues in common -- belief in God, angels and the Day of Judgement, in the virtues of prayer, charity and fasting, and in the importance of truthfulness, patience, and love. Together, Christians and Muslims make up more than half the world's population, and rather than being ideological opposites as some people imagine, their faiths are in many ways the most alike of the world's major religions.

Early Muslims were granted protection in Christian Abyssinia

This common ground is one of the reasons the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) advised the weak and poor among his early followers to seek refuge in Christian Abyssinia (present-day Ethiopia) to escape persecution by the idolatrous Arab tribes, before Islam became established in Arabia. Muslim historians' account of the event succinctly conveys the heart of the relationship between the two faiths. When the corrupt leaders of Makkah pursued the Muslims into Africa and asked the Negus to return them, the Abyssinian ruler summoned the small community of Muslims, then asked them: "What is this religion which has caused you to become separate from your people, though you have not entered my religion or that of any other folk around us?"

Their spokesman Ja'far, Muhammad's young cousin, replied: "O King, we were a people steeped in ignorance, worshipping idols, eating unslaughtered meat, committing abominations, and the strong would devour the weak. That is how we were until God sent us a Messenger from out of our midst, one whose lineage

was known to us, and whose truthfulness, trustworthiness and integrity were renowned. He called us to God -- that we should testify to His Oneness, and worship Him and renounce what we and our ancestors had worshipped in the way of stones and idols; and he commanded us to speak truly, to fulfil our promises, to respect the ties of kinship and the rights of our neighbours, and to refrain from crimes and bloodshed. So we worship God alone, setting nothing beside Him, counting as forbidden what He has forbidden and as permissible what He has allowed. For these reasons our people have turned against us, and persecuted us to try to make us forsake our religion and revert from the worship of God to the worship of idols. That is why we have come to your country, having chosen you above all others. We have been happy under your protection, and it is our hope, O King, that here with you we shall not suffer wrong."

His speech was translated by the royal interpreters, after which the Negus asked if they had with them any revelation their prophet had brought them. Ja'far then recited the following verses of the Qur'an, from the chapter entitled 'Mary':

"And make mention of Mary in the Scripture, when she withdrew from her people to a place towards the east, and secluded herself from them. We sent to her Our spirit (the angel Gabriel), and he appeared to her in the likeness of a perfect man. She said, 'I seek refuge in the Compassionate God from you; (do not come near me) if you fear the Lord.' He replied, 'I am none other than a messenger from your Lord, (to announce) to you the gift of a pure son.' She said, 'How can I have a son when no man has touched me, nor am I unchaste?' He said, 'Even so will it be; your Lord says, 'This is an easy thing for Me. And We shall make him a sign for humanity and a mercy from Us. So it has been decreed.' (Qur'an 19: 16-21).

Ja'far's recitation and the translation of these verses brought tears to the king's eyes. He responded: "This has truly come from the same source as that which Jesus brought." He granted the Muslims his protection. But the tribesmen of Makkah, furious that their plans and alliances had been frustrated, decided to rouse the king's ire against their monotheist cousins by playing up the differences between Christianity and Islam regarding Jesus. The king assembled them together once again and asked: "What do you say about Jesus, son of Mary?"

Ja'far replied: "We say of him what our Prophet has brought us, namely that he is the servant of God and His Messenger, and His Spirit and Word which He cast into Mary, the blessed virgin."

The Negus then lifted his wooden staff and said: "Jesus does not exceed what you have said by the length of this stick." The bishops present objected to the king's judgment, but that did not deter him from granting the small Muslim community full protection, declaring: "Not for mountains of gold would I harm a single one of you". (Adapted from *Muhammad: His Life Based on the Earliest Sources*, by Martin Lings).

That was Christianity's first encounter with Islam, and is how Islam first came to flourish -- in Africa, under the protection of a benevolent Christian king.

Different Christian views on Jesus

It may surprise some to think of any Christians accepting a description of Jesus that fell short of 'only-begotten Son of God' and 'Saviour', but the Negus would have known of the theological arguments that had raged between various sects in the Eastern birthplace of Christianity for centuries after Christ. Christians had been divided roughly into two 'camps' from the beginning, which can perhaps best be described as people who followed the religion of Jesus, versus those who followed a religion about Jesus. The first is exemplified by his disciples, who lived as Jews, believed in One God, and followed the Law of Moses -- which Jesus had come 'not to destroy, but to fulfil' (Matthew 5:17). They had no concept of Jesus originating a new religion: they worshipped in the temple, and focused their efforts on spreading the good news to fellow Jews that their Messiah had come. This group further developed and became known as Arians, after Arius, a North African bishop who emphasized Jesus' human nature.

The second was led by Paul, a charismatic speaker who had never met Jesus and had persecuted many Christians before his sudden conversion. Under his leadership, Pauline Christians directed their conversion efforts towards non-Jews and developed a theology foreign to the Old Testament, including belief in a Trinity (which had been prevalent among Romans, Egyptians and other pagans), an emphasis on Jesus as the 'son' of God, associated concepts of original sin and atonement, and the central dogma of Jesus' (supposed) crucifixion and resurrection.

The Council of Nicea

Disagreements between these and other sects had grown so great by the 4th century that the Roman Emperor Constantine decided to convene the Council of Nicea (Iznik, Turkey) in 325, to settle the matter of true belief 'once and for all'. During this event (in which Constantine's own trinitarianism was made known), the bishops of the Christian world gathered together for the first time to debate doctrine, and a draft creed espousing belief in a Trinity of 'Father, Son and Holy Ghost' received the most votes. Dissenting bishops were suddenly declared heretics; their writings were banned, and the gospels supporting them burned. That marked the birth of the Roman Catholic Church, state religion of the Roman empire. Tens of gospels and other writings that individual churches had been free to use, some which

presented an alternative view of Jesus, were destroyed; only four were included in the New Testament collection, along with a heavy dose of Paul's writings. Despite this totalitarian approach to achieving 'religious unity', a small number of dissenting Christian sects survived, together with alternative gospels that were carefully hidden and only came to light in the 20th century.

Viewed in historical context, the main theological differences between Muslims and Christians are largely the same differences that have been a major source of disagreement between Christians themselves from the beginning. These concern the nature and role of Jesus, his relationship with God, and how best to venerate and follow his example.

Beloved servant, son of Mary; not 'Son' of God

In contrast to the often contradictory passages of the New Testament, the Qur'an teaches monotheism, pure and simple: faith in One God, Creator and Sustainer of the universe, a Supreme Being without partners, associates or family members. There is no concept of an intermediary in Islam, whether priest or saviour, who must intercede between a human being and his Creator. Whatever individual Christians may understand by the term 'son' or 'Father' -- whether in their minds the terms symbolize no more than a caring, loving relationship, or whether they regard belief in the Trinity as the key to avoiding eternal damnation -- Islam considers that the Christian view in which Jesus is 'idolized' while God is 'humanized', obscures Jesus' invaluable role as master teacher and role model, while vastly underestimating God's transcendent majesty. It is impossible, indeed inconceivable to Muslims that the Almighty Creator of the Universe could appear in any human form, whole or in 'part', constrained by time and space. As the prophet Solomon is reported as saying after completing the Temple of Jerusalem: "But will God really dwell on earth? The heavens, even the highest heaven, cannot contain You. How much less this temple I have built!" (1 Kings 8:27)

While the Qur'an, like the Bible, confirms that Jesus had no human father, it does not accept that this makes Jesus the son of God any more than it does Adam himself, who was created without either father or mother. Rather, when God decides something, "**He need only say to it 'Be!' and it is'**" (Qur'an 3:47). It is interesting to note that the term Jesus most often used of himself in the New Testament gospels is 'son of man' (in Hebrew, literally the 'son of Adam'); a term that for Muslims emphasizes his human nature. The phrase 'son of man' also appears in the Old Testament, where it underscores man's insignificance before God as well as the undeserved honour God has shown him: "How then can a man be righteous before God?...If even the stars are not pure in His eyes, how much less man, who is but a maggot -- a son of man, who is only a worm!" (Job 25:4-6).

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Building bridges between the West and the Muslim world

Jesus, the son of Mary

"When I consider Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, the moon and the stars, which You have set in place, What is man that You are mindful of him, the son of man that You care for him? You made him a little lower than the heavenly beings, and crowned him with glory and honour." (Psalms 8: 3-5).

Christian arguments against the Trinity

Many Arians, Unitarians and other like-minded Christians have argued against the existence of a trinity, basing their reasoning on passages of the Bible itself. The lack of any mention of the word or concept in the Old Testament is one of the most important, as God surely would have found it important enough to mention to Moses and the many other prophets of old. Yet the cornerstone of the Jewish faith has always been: "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 strength." (Deut. 6:4), and: "You shall have no other gods besides Me." (Deut. 5:7).

Jesus never taught his followers to worship him, and no record exists of him preaching about a trinity. "By myself I can do nothing" (John 5:30), "the Father is greater than I" (John 14:28), and many similar statements of his support pure monotheism, although other passages in the New Testament contradict it. Many Christians came to the conclusion that the Biblical texts must have been corrupted, as indeed the Qur'an asserts. The reader is referred to the writings of John Biddle, father of Unitarianism, as well as others such as John Milton, Sir Isaac Newton, John Locke, Thomas Jefferson, and Benjamin Franklin for examples of this kind of reasoning.

The Qur'anic position on Jesus

The Qur'an speaks of 'the Gospel' (Injil) as a Scripture revealed to Jesus by God, from which he preached, like the Torah of Moses. It is clear from early Christian history as well as modern Biblical studies that this original Scripture has been lost forever, and the fragments that remain in the form of various gospels have been corrupted so that they do not inspire confidence. The Qur'an, which was revealed partly in order to clarify points that had been misunderstood by previous religious groups, paints a brief but clear portrait of Jesus as Messenger of God.

Responding to the views of an early Christian sect known as 'Adoptionists', who believed that God had 'adopted' Jesus, the Qur'an says: "It does not befit (the majesty of) the Compassionate God that He should adopt a son. There is none in the heavens and the earth but shall come to the Compassionate One as a servant." (Qur'an 19: 92-93).

The Qur'an further states: "O People of the Scripture, do not exaggerate or go to extremes in your religion, or say anything about God but the truth. The Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary, was no more than an (honoured) Messenger of God, and His word that He imparted to Mary, and a spirit from Him. So believe in God and His Messengers and do not say, 'Three (in One).' Cease, for your own good! For your Lord is One God; Glory be to Him – (He is far) above having a son! All that is in the heavens and the earth belongs to Him. And God is Sufficient as Guardian (of the affairs of the universe). The Messiah would never scorn to be a servant of God, nor would the angels who are near (to Him)...". (Qur'an 4: 171-2)

The Angel Gabriel announced to the Virgin Mary the miraculous nature of the child she was to bear by saying: "O Mary, God gives you the good news of a word from Him, whose name is the Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary, held in high honour in this world and the Next, and one of those brought near (to Him). He will speak to people in his cradle and in the prime of manhood, and he is one of the righteous... (God) will teach him the Scripture and wisdom, and the Torah and the Gospel. And (will appoint him as) a Messenger to the Children of Israel (saying), 'I come to you with a miracle from your Lord (as proof of my message). I will make the likeness of a bird for you out of clay; (then) I will breathe into it and, by God's permission, it shall become a (living) bird. And by God's permission I will give sight to those born blind, and heal the leper, and raise the dead to life. And I will inform you of what you eat and what you store in your houses. Surely that is a sign for you, if you are believers. And (I come to you) confirming (what has been sent down before me in) the Torah, and in order to make some of the things which were forbidden (in the past) lawful for you. I came to you with a sign from your Lord, so fear Allah and obey me. God is my Lord and your Lord, so worship Him. That is the straight path.' (Qur'an 3: 45-51)

Some of these miracles are unfamiliar to modern readers of the Bible, but the accounts do appear in the 'Infancy Gospels', which enjoyed wide circulation in Eastern churches for centuries.

Jesus was saved by God not crucified; his return is awaited by Muslims

Another point of contention surrounding the life of Jesus has been that of the crucifixion: whereas Christians have regarded it

as an essential point of faith, Jews took it as proof that Jesus was not the promised Messiah, since God would not have allowed His chosen one to suffer such humiliation at the hands of his enemies. The Islamic position is that the crucifixion of Jesus never happened, although it appeared to. We may note that the descriptions given in the New Testament gospels of the crucifixion cannot be considered accurate eyewitness accounts since, in their words, 'all the disciples fled' when Jesus was arrested. The work of modern Biblical scholars lends support to the Islamic position. They have established that the earliest (original) gospels make no mention of either crucifixion or resurrection, but focus instead on Jesus' teachings and miracles.

The Qur'an says: "(The Jews who rejected Jesus earned God's displeasure) because of their denying the truth and slandering Mary with a terrible accusation; and because of their (boasting) claim, 'We killed the Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary, God's Messenger!' They neither killed him nor crucified him, though it was made to appear that way to them. Those who disagree about this (matter) are full of doubts; they have no knowledge about it except to follow guesswork and speculation, but they certainly did not kill him. Rather, God raised him up to Himself; and God is ever Mighty, Wise. There is not one of the People of the Scripture who will not believe in him (as he should be believed in) before his death (e.g. after his Second Coming), and on the Day of Judgement he will be a witness against them." (Qur'an 4:156-9).

The most prevalent interpretation of these verses among Muslim scholars is that someone else (such as the traitor Judas Iscariot) was crucified instead, while Jesus was raised to heaven, as God often saves those beloved to Him. The Prophet Muhammad taught that Jesus will return to earth one day to rule in peace and justice, although Islamic prophecies on the subject differ from Christian ones.

The historical Jesus: Messiah, Messenger, Wise Teacher and Prophet

The Islamic view of Jesus is a logical and reasonable one, which is consistent with earlier Biblical teachings, and people today can relate to: he was a virtuous and wise teacher; an ascetic who taught by personal example and spoke without fear against corruption in high places; prophet and Messiah of the Jewish people, who healed and brought the dead to life by God's permission; an honoured Messenger of God. Rather than being sent to found a new religion, he came to 'breathe life' into and revitalise the interpretation of Mosaic Law.

Stories related by Muslims about Jesus are plentiful, and highlight his role as teacher of wisdom. A few examples are: Jesus said: "Do not hang jewels around the necks of swine. Wisdom is finer than gems, and those who do not value it are worse than swine."

Jesus said: "A plant can only grow in yielding earth, not on hard rock. In the same way, wisdom flourishes only in a humble heart, not one which is proud and unyielding."

(The above and many other sayings are related by the classical Muslim scholar Al-Ghazali in his Revival of the Religious Sciences. For translations of and information on other gospels, see The Complete Gospels, edited by R.J. Miller.)

Sayings of

PROPHET MUHAMMAD relating to JESUS

The Prophet Muhammad spoke with much affection and respect of Jesus, and taught Muslims to do the same. Relating some of Jesus' teachings, he said:

"Jesus, son of Mary, used to say, 'Do not speak much without mentioning God, for your hearts will become hardened. A hard heart is far from God, if you only knew.'

"Do not look at the wrong actions of others as though you were lords; look at your own wrong actions as if you were slaves."

And Muhammad emphasised the true and common message of Christianity and Islam, saying:

"Both in this world and in the Hereafter, I am the nearest of all people to Jesus, son of Mary. The prophets are paternal brothers; their mothers are different, but their religion is one."

Islam's invitation to Christians

Many Arab Christians converted to Islam during and soon after Muhammad's lifetime because they recognised the simple truth of his message, and were convinced that New Testament passages foretelling the appearance of a 'Comforter' and other Biblical prophecies referred to him. Those who seek a truly historical prophet, whose life and teachings have been lovingly and meticulously preserved in remarkable detail, may wish to learn more about Muhammad – another great leader who continues to be widely misunderstood.

We conclude with the words of the Qur'an:

"Say, 'O People of the Scripture, (let us) come to an agreement together: that we will worship none but God, and that we will not associate any (other god) with Him, and that none of us shall take others for lords besides God.' And if they turn away, then say, 'Bear witness that we are (the ones who have surrendered to Him, as) Muslims.' (Qur'an 3:64).

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