

Feature Article: JAF1401

## JESUS IN ISLAM

by David Wood

This article first appeared in the CHRISTIAN RESEARCH JOURNAL, volume 40, number 01 (2017). For further information or to subscribe to the CHRISTIAN RESEARCH JOURNAL, go to: <http://www.equip.org/christian-research-journal/>.

---

### SYNOPSIS

Muslims around the world are quick to insist that, like Christians, they believe in Jesus. The Jesus we read about in Islam's most trusted sources, however, differs from the biblical Jesus in significant ways. While Muslims agree with Christians on many crucial details surrounding Jesus' life (e.g., His angelic annunciation, virgin conception, and miracles), they reject the core elements relating to the gospel (i.e., His divine nature, sacrificial death, and resurrection).

A careful examination of the similarities and differences between the Christian and Muslim views of Jesus reveals three sources of Islamic claims about Jesus. First, many claims can be traced back to orthodox Christian sources (either directly or through written or oral intermediaries). These patches of common ground are excellent places to begin conversations. Second, Islamic stories about Jesus that have no precedent in orthodox Christian sources nevertheless often can be found in apocryphal (sometimes heretical) works from the second through seventh centuries. Since Muhammad's apparent borrowing from unreliable sources calls his revelations into question, this category is useful for apologists challenging Islam. Third, a variety of details about Jesus that are unique to Islam seem to have been invented to bring Jesus into line with Islamic theology. Here history may be used as a check to Muhammad's claims.

The result of mixing these incompatible sources is a kind of hybrid Jesus that doesn't fit well into any theological background. The Islamic Jesus falls short of

Christian orthodoxy, but cannot be contained in the prophet box Muhammad constructed for him.

---

Jesus is the most enigmatic figure in the Muslim sources. On the one hand, the Qur'an attempts to undermine the Christian perspective by reducing Jesus to a mere messenger of Allah. On the other hand, Jesus is astonishingly unique in Islam, as his titles, virgin conception, miraculous works, and future role set him apart even from Muhammad.<sup>1</sup> While the uniqueness of Jesus makes perfect sense in Christianity (since the God-man has no parallel), Muhammad's teachings leave us wondering, "Why is Jesus so radically different from everyone else?"

### HIS NAME

The Arabic transliteration of *Yeshua* (Jesus' name in Hebrew) is *Yasu*, which is the name for Jesus used by Arabic-speaking Christians. The Qur'an, however, in Arabic refers to Jesus as *Isa* (pronounced "eesa"), and there is no small amount of confusion among commentators concerning the origin of this name. The most likely proposals are (1) that *Isa* is an indirect transliteration of *Yeshua* through multiple languages, (2) that Muhammad modified the name for literary purposes, and (3) that Muhammad was tricked into using the Arabic form of the Hebrew name "Esau" (presumably by Arabian Jews who referred to Jesus as "Esau" in a derogatory sense).

### HIS TITLES

The Qur'an calls Jesus a prophet (*nabi*) and a messenger (*rasul*), though these titles are used of other familiar figures in the Qur'an. Three titles are applied uniquely to Jesus (all three together in 4:171):

- *Messiah*. The Qur'an refers to Jesus as "Messiah" (al-Masih) eight times (3:45; 4:157, 171-2; 5:17, 72, 75; 9:30), but the text gives no indication as to the meaning of this title. Further, whereas the Bible repeatedly connects the title "Messiah" with "Son of God" (see Matt. 16:16; Mark 14:61; etc.), the Qur'an explicitly denies this connection (see 9:30).

- *Spirit from Allah.* Qur'an 4:171 denies the doctrine of the Trinity and commands Christians not to have an exaggerated view of Jesus. When telling Christians what to believe about Jesus, however, the verse describes Jesus as a "spirit from him" (i.e., a spirit from Allah). Unfortunately, the Qur'an sheds no more light on the title "spirit from Allah" than it does on the title "Messiah."
- *Word of Allah.* Jesus is called "a word from him" (i.e., a word from Allah) in Qur'an 3:45 and "his word" (i.e., Allah's word) in 4:171. Here again, the Qur'an does not explain the significance of Jesus being Allah's word (*kalimat*), though Muhammad must have adopted the phrase from Christians without understanding its origin as a divine title in the prologue of John's Gospel.

### HIS ANNUNCIATION

In the Gospel of Luke, the angel Gabriel tells Mary that she will have a son named Jesus. Gabriel says to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name Him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High" (1:30–32).<sup>2</sup>

The Qur'an contains similar stories about the annunciation. One notable difference is that whereas Luke has Gabriel declaring that Jesus shall be called "Son of the Most High," the Qur'an has Gabriel say that Jesus' name is "Jesus, the son of Mary": "O Mary! Allah giveth thee glad tidings of a Word from Him: his name will be Christ Jesus, the son of Mary, held in honor in this world and the Hereafter and of (the company of) those nearest to Allah" (Qur'an 3:45).<sup>3</sup>

Since both Luke and the Qur'an precede the annunciation with the story of Zacharias being mute after questioning Gabriel, it is clear that the Qur'anic account is loosely based on Luke (passed on to Muhammad orally either from Luke's Gospel itself or from other works that drew from Luke). But all "Son of God" language (which occurs in Luke's version in verses 32 and 35) has been purged from the annunciation in the Qur'an.

### HIS CONCEPTION

The Qur'an is more graphic than the Bible when describing Jesus' miraculous conception. Matthew simply says that, before Mary and Joseph came together, she "was found to be with child by the Holy Spirit" (1:18). The Qur'an, by contrast, says that Allah blew his spirit into Mary's vagina.

Qur'an translators have been reluctant to give the verses discussing Jesus' conception a literal rendering. Thus, Yusuf Ali translates *farj* (vagina, opening, private part) as "chastity": "And Mary the daughter of Imran, who guarded her chastity; and We breathed into (her body) of Our spirit; and she testified to the truth of the words of her Lord and of His Revelations, and was one of the devout (servants)" (Qur'an 66:12).

The renowned Muslim commentator Ibn Kathir includes the literal meaning, although he interprets "spirit" as referring to the angel Gabriel:

(And Maryam, the daughter of Imran, who guarded her chastity [private part]) *meaning, who protected and purified her honor, by being chaste and free of immorality.* (And We breathed into it [private part] through Our Ruh) *meaning, through the angel Gabriel. Allah sent the angel Gabriel to Maryam, and he came to her in the shape of a man in every respect. Allah commanded him to blow into a gap of her garment and that breath went into her womb through her private part; this is how Isa was conceived.*<sup>4</sup> (Emphasis and bracketed portions in original.)

## HIS BIRTH

In Islam, the birth of Jesus is miraculous not only because of his conception but also because of the events that followed his birth, including an apparently supernatural provision of water and theological lessons from the infant Jesus. The Qur'an reports:

*So she conceived him, and she retired with him to a remote place. And the pains of childbirth drove her to the trunk of a palm tree. She cried (in her anguish): "Ah! would that I had died before this! would that I had been a thing forgotten and out of sight!" But (a voice) cried to her from beneath the (palm tree): "Grieve not! for thy Lord hath provided a rivulet beneath thee; and shake towards thyself the trunk of the palm tree; it will let fall fresh ripe dates upon thee."* (19:22–25)

To readers of late apocryphal gospels, the story of the palm tree will sound familiar. The early seventh-century *Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew* tells us that, shortly after Jesus' birth, as Mary and Joseph traveled to Egypt, the heat became oppressive, and Mary stopped to rest under a palm tree. When she complained, "I wish it were possible to get some of the fruit of this palm," Joseph replied that he was more concerned about their empty water skins. Jesus then spoke and ordered the palm tree to lower its branches so that the couple could reach its fruit. After the tree complied, Jesus

commanded it to open a vein of water from its roots. Mary and Joseph were thus saved from the desert heat.<sup>5</sup>

The Qur'an never mentions Mary's husband Joseph. Mary therefore appears to her relatives with a newborn baby and no husband. Fortunately, Jesus speaks in order to protect his mother's reputation:

*At length she brought the (babe) to her people, carrying him (in her arms). They said: "O Mary! Truly an amazing thing hast thou brought! O sister of Aaron! Thy father was not a man of evil, nor thy mother a woman unchaste!" But she pointed to the babe. They said: "How can we talk to one who is a child in the cradle?" He said: "I am indeed a servant of Allah: He hath given me revelation and made me a prophet; and He hath made me blessed wheresoever I be, and hath enjoined on me Prayer and Charity as long as I live. (He) hath made me kind to my mother, and not overbearing or miserable. So peace is on me the day I was born, the day that I die, and the day that I shall be raised up to life (again)!" (Qur'an 19:27-33)*

Once again, readers acquainted with apocryphal literature will notice a parallel. The sixth-century *Arabic Infancy Gospel* (also called the *Syriac Infancy Gospel*) has Jesus say to Mary from the cradle, "I am Jesus, the Son of God, the Logos, whom thou hast brought forth, as the Angel Gabriel announced to thee; and my Father has sent me for the salvation of the world."<sup>6</sup> In both accounts, then, Jesus declares his mission shortly after birth. The missions reported, however, are remarkably different.

## HIS MIRACLES

In addition to speaking and preaching as an infant, the Muslim Jesus performs a number of other miracles in the Qur'an, though the Qur'an is careful to note that Jesus performs these miracles "by Allah's permission." These include:

- *Giving life to clay birds* (3:49; 5:110). The story of Jesus giving life to clay birds is also found in the second-century Infancy Gospel of Thomas, where Jesus, as a five-year-old, is condemned for sculpting clay sparrows on the Sabbath, only for him to clap his hands and yell "Go!" The sparrows then fly away, to the amazement of the onlookers.

- *Giving sight to people blind since birth* (3:49; 5:110). For biblical examples of Jesus giving sight to the blind, see Matthew 9:27–31; 20:30–34; Mark 8:22–26; and John 9:1–38.
- *Cleansing lepers* (3:49; 5:110). For biblical parallels, see Mark 1:40–45 and Luke 17:11–19.
- *Raising the dead* (3:49; 5:110). Jesus raises the dead in Matthew 9:18–26; Luke 7:11–18; and John 11:1–46.
- *Possessing supernatural knowledge* (3:49). Though the biblical Jesus often displays supernatural knowledge (see, e.g., John 1:48–49; 4:17–19; etc.), the Qur’an specifies that Jesus could tell people about what they eat and what they store in their houses.
- *Calling down a table from heaven* (5:112–5). This story seems to be a highly embellished account of the Last Supper. Jesus’ disciples ask him to call down from heaven a table prepared for a feast. Jesus prays to Allah, and Allah grants the request.

The Qur’an thus contains miracle stories with both biblical and nonbiblical parallels, along with a unique account of a miraculous table from heaven. When considered together with the stories surrounding Jesus’ birth, it seems that Muhammad couldn’t tell the difference between (a) historical accounts that can be traced to the first century, and (b) legends that developed much later.

### HIS PERFECTION

While it is common for Muslims today to insist that all prophets are sinless, this claim doesn’t come from the Qur’an. Indeed, according to the Qur’an, Allah repeatedly ordered Muhammad to seek forgiveness of his sins (see 40:55; 47:19; and 48:2). In the Hadith, we find Muhammad declaring: “By Allah! I seek Allah’s forgiveness and turn to Him in repentance more than seventy times a day.”<sup>7</sup>

By contrast, the Qur'an calls Jesus "faultless" (19:19). Although the Qur'an applies a similar term to John the Baptist (19:13), Muhammad declares in the Hadith that Jesus is unique among the prophets in that Jesus was the only one Satan couldn't touch: "The Prophet said: When any human being is born, Satan touches him at both sides of the body with his two fingers, except Jesus, the son of Mary, whom Satan tried to touch (but failed), so he touched the placenta-cover (instead)."<sup>8</sup> The claim of many modern Muslims that all prophets are sinless appears to be an attempt to deny this uniqueness.

### HIS MESSAGE

The Qur'an maintains that all true prophets, including Jesus, shared the same religion (see 42:13). Hence, Jesus' message cannot differ significantly from Muhammad's. The Muslim Jesus calls himself a servant of Allah and a prophet (19:30); he says that Allah requires him to observe prayer and almsgiving throughout his life (19:31); he says he came to "make lawful" some of what had been forbidden under Jewish law (3:50); and he declares, "Allah, He is my Lord and your Lord: so worship ye Him" (43:64).

Concerning Christian belief in the deity of Christ, Allah will ask Jesus about this on the day of Resurrection:

*And behold! Allah will say: "O Jesus the son of Mary! Didst thou say unto men, 'Worship me and my mother as gods in derogation of Allah'?" He will say: "Glory to Thee! Never could I say what I had no right (to say). Had I said such a thing, thou wouldst indeed have known it. Thou knowest what is in my heart, though I know not what is in Thine. For Thou knowest in full all that is hidden." (Qur'an 5:116)*

### HIS PROPHECY

Qur'an 7:157 asserts that Muhammad is mentioned in the Torah and the Gospel, and that Jews and Christians can find references to him. The Qur'an also maintains that Jesus predicted the coming of Muhammad: "And remember, Jesus, the son of Mary, said: 'O Children of Israel! I am the messenger of Allah (sent) to you, confirming the Law (which came) before me, and giving Glad Tidings of a Messenger to come after me, whose name shall be Ahmad'" (Qur'an 61:6).

The names "Ahmad" and "Muhammad" are related, for both are derived from the Arabic root *h-m-d*, meaning "praised." More importantly for Muslims, Muhammad claimed "Ahmad" as one of his names.<sup>9</sup> Muslim apologists have attempted to link the

name “Ahmad” to Jesus’ prophecy of the coming Comforter (Gk., *paracletos*) in John 14:16, often by claiming (without any manuscript support) that the Greek text has been corrupted. Since Jesus identifies the Comforter as “the Spirit of truth” and tells His followers that “he abides with you and will be in you,” it is clear that Muslim efforts to find Ahmad mentioned in John 14 are based on a prior commitment to Islam rather than on any genuine textual support.

## HIS FOLLOWERS

According to the Qur’an, some of Jesus’ Jewish listeners accepted his message and converted to Islam, while others continued in their unbelief: “When Jesus found unbelief on their part he said: ‘Who will be my helpers to (the work of) Allah?’ Said the disciples: ‘We are Allah’s helpers: We believe in Allah, and do thou bear witness that we are Muslims’” (Qur’an 3:52).

But Allah didn’t leave Jesus’ followers to fend for themselves. Instead, he says that he “gave power to those who believed against their enemies, and they became the ones that prevailed” (Qur’an 61:14). Allah even promised Jesus to protect his followers until the day of Resurrection: “Behold! Allah said: ‘O Jesus! I will take thee and raise thee to Myself and clear thee (of the falsehoods) of those who blaspheme; I will make those who follow thee superior to those who reject faith, to the Day of Resurrection: Then shall you all return unto me, and I will judge between you of the matters wherein you dispute’” (Qur’an 3:55).

## HIS RESCUE

In the verse just quoted, Allah tells Jesus, “I will take thee and raise thee to Myself.” Read in isolation, one might think that this refers to Jesus’ resurrection. However, when read in light of another passage of the Qur’an, along with the relevant commentaries, Allah’s words suggest a miraculous rescue.

In Qur’an 4:157–158, certain Jews boast that they killed the Messiah. Allah informs them that they neither killed him nor crucified him: “They said (in boast), ‘We killed Christ Jesus the son of Mary, the Messenger of Allah’ — But they killed him not, nor crucified him, but so it was made to appear to them, and those who differ therein are full of doubts, with no (certain) knowledge, but only conjecture to follow, for of a surety they killed him not — Nay, Allah raised him up unto Himself; and Allah is Exalted in Power, Wise” (Qur’an 4:157–8).

This passage is far from clear. Nevertheless, a variety of early commentaries have led the vast majority of Muslims to adopt some version of *substitution theory* — the view



that someone was crucified in Jesus' place. The most common Muslim position today is that Allah miraculously disguised Judas to look like Jesus. Then Judas was crucified in Jesus' place, while Jesus was taken safely to heaven.

A variety of parallels to the Islamic substitution thesis may be found in tales by the Gnostics and Docetists (second century and later). In *The Second Treatise of the Great Seth*, for instance, a miraculously transformed Jesus laughs as he declares, "I did not die in reality but in appearance....For my death, which they think happened, (happened) to them in their error and blindness, since they nailed their man unto their death."<sup>10</sup>

## HIS RETURN

The standard Islamic understanding of Jesus' rescue seems to require a second coming. If Qur'an 4:157–8 asserts that Jesus was taken to heaven alive, this claim must be reconciled with other passages of the Qur'an, which imply that Jesus would die (e.g., 19:33).

To make sense of these conflicting claims, Muslims must believe that Jesus is going to return to Earth at some point in the future, and that he will die and be resurrected. This is exactly what we find in the Hadith. Indeed, Muhammad affirmed a startling role for Jesus at his second coming: "Allah's Messenger said, 'The Hour will not be established until the son of Mary [i.e., Isa (Jesus)] descends amongst you and will judge mankind justly by the Law of the Qur'an (as a just ruler); he will break the cross, kill the pigs, and abolish the *jizya* tax. Money will be in abundance so that nobody will accept it (as charitable gifts).'"<sup>11</sup>

The *jizya* (poll tax) won't be abolished because of the abundance of money, but because Allah "will cause all religions to perish except Islam."<sup>12</sup> According to other traditions, Jesus will wage jihad<sup>13</sup> against unbelievers, kill the Antichrist, get married, have children, take the pilgrimage to Mecca, reign for forty years, die, and be buried near Muhammad in Medina.<sup>14</sup>

## ASSESSMENT

The Islamic Jesus bears many similarities to the Christian Jesus (e.g., angelic annunciation, virgin conception, miraculous life, Messiahship, etc.). Some degree of resemblance should be expected, since Muhammad had regular interactions with Christians and repeatedly was accused of copying stories from others (see Qur'an 6:25; 8:31; 16:24; 25:4–6; 46:17; 68:15; and 83:13). Nevertheless, that Muhammad granted so many crucial and supernatural facts about Jesus is striking, and Christians should make use of these points of agreement in their discussions with Muslims.

Also striking, however, are the points of disagreement. The Qur'an denies Jesus' deity, death, and resurrection, which happen to be the three key elements of the Christian gospel. The apostle Paul proclaimed that "if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved" (Rom. 10:9). For Christians who have been warned to "beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves" (Matt. 7:15), Muhammad's corruption of the gospel can serve only as confirmation of his status as a false prophet.

**David Wood** (PhD, Fordham University) is a member of the Society of Christian Philosophers and the Evangelical Philosophical Society. He has been in more than forty moderated public debates with Muslims.

---

## NOTES

- 1 Editor's note: CHRISTIAN RESEARCH JOURNAL policy is to capitalize pronouns referring to the biblical God and Jesus, but not to capitalize pronouns referencing essentially unbiblical conceptions of God and "other Jesuses" of false religions.
- 2 All Bible quotations are from the New American Standard Bible.
- 3 All Qur'an quotations are taken from the Abdullah Yusuf Ali translation. Due to different ways of transliterating Arabic names, I have standardized some of the spellings in quotations.
- 4 *Tafsir Ibn Kathir*, abr., vol. 10 (Riyadh, Saudi Arabia: Darussalam Publishers, 2000), 55–56. Roman text (portions not in italics) indicate Qur'an quotations.
- 5 *The Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew*, New Advent, <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0848.htm>.
- 6 *The Arabic Infancy Gospel of the Savior*, The Gnostic Society Library, <http://gnosis.org/library/infarab.htm>.
- 7 *Sahih al-Bukhari*, trans. Muhammad Muhsin Khan (Riyadh: Darussalam Publishers, 1997), 6307. *Hadith* refers to the collected accounts regarding Muhammad's teachings and way of life. *Sahih al-Bukhari* is among the most trusted collections.
- 8 *Sahih al-Bukhari*, 3286.
- 9 See *Sahih al-Bukhari*, 3532.
- 10 *The Second Treatise of the Great Seth*, The Gnostic Society Library, <http://gnosis.org/naghamm/2seth.html>.
- 11 *Sahih al-Bukhari*, 2476.
- 12 *Sunan Abu Dawud*, trans. Nasiruddin al-Khattab (Riyadh: Darussalam Publishers, 2008), 4324.
- 13 Warfare to expand or defend Islam.
- 14 *Sunan Abu Dawud*, 4324.