

ISA AND JESUS: A COMPARISON OF THE LIFE OF THE PROPHET 'ISA IN THE QUR'ĀN AND CHRIST IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

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ملخص

إن نبي الله عيسى عليه السلام هو أهم شخصية لتابعي الديانة الإبراهيمية خصوصا الإسلامية والنصرانية. هناك أوجه تشابه بينهم كما أن هناك أوجه اختلاف. من ناحية الاسم هناك اختلافات وهي عيسى وجيسوس ويسوع. ويختلفون كذلك -مثلا- في مسألة : هل توفي عيسى مصلوبا أم لا. تحاول هذه المقالة أن تصف النبي عيسى عليه السلام في القرآن الكريم و جيسوس في الإنجيل (العهد الجديد). من خلال هذين الكتابين يحاول الكاتب بيان أوجه الشبه والاختلاف التي لا بد من فهمها بكل تسامح .

Abstrak

Nabi 'Isa merupakan tokoh yang sangat penting bagi penganut agama-agama Ibrahim, khususnya Islam dan Kristen/Nasrani. Walaupun banyak persamaan hal pada tokoh fenomenal ini, namun tidak sedikit pula perbedaannya. Dari namanya, masing-masing agama Ibrahim mempunyai perbedaan sebutan, 'Isa, Yesus dan Yeshua. Konsep masing-masing umat beragama tentang Nabi 'Isa, putera Maryam, ini juga banyak perbedaannya, misalnya, apakah 'Isa benar-benar mati disalib atau tidak. Artikel ini berusaha untuk mendeskripsikan konsep Nabi 'Isa menurut al-Qur'an dan juga konsep Yesus menurut kitab Injil versi Perjanjian Baru. Gambaran dari kedua kitab Suci ini akan lebih menjelaskan persamaan dan sekaligus perbedaannya. Akhirnya, persamaan dan perbedaan itu harus dipahami dengan baik dan penuh toleran tanpa harus diperselisihkan.

Keywords: myth, revelation, miracle, truth, divinity

A. Introduction

He walked the earth 2,000 years ago, yet his influence is still felt today. From a humble beginning in a small town in the first century, his story has been a topic for discussion in the palaces of kings, the halls of statesmen, and the institutions of academia ever since. From the cradle of civilization of his message now influences the globe in thousands of languages. He is Jesus Christ.

Over half the populations on the globe believe in Jesus Christ as a historical, personal figure of religious significance. Yet, the interpretation of his life is a vast mosaic of belief, whether individual faith or institutional creed. He has almost as many names as there are languages. In his own language, Hebrew, he is *Yeshua*, meaning “the Lord saves”. In Spanish he is *Jesus Kristos*, and in Arabic, he is *ʿIsa al-Masīḥ*. Furthermore, there seems to be almost as many opinions about his life as there are names. To the Christians, Jesus is the Son of God, God incarnate, who came to earth to die for the sins of the world and restore our relationship to the Most High God. To the Muslims, *ʿIsa* is a great prophet; like all the other great prophets who came before him, he reaffirmed the message from God that came before him and prepared the way of the prophet who would come after him.¹ To the atheist, he is only a man who taught anecdotal parables and some quotable quotes. To revolutionaries, Jesus is a man who rebelled against the authorities of his day and received martyrdom for his reward. To so many others, Jesus is an enigma, a puzzle that will never be solved. To those people, Jesus’ life left to decided for each individual.

Some opinions about Christ are based on pure speculation. Others are based on mythic tales. Still others are based on historical written accounts that allow for investigation into who Jesus Christ really is. Two main sources about the life of Christ are the New Testament (NT) and the Qur’ān. The Christians believe the revelation about Jesus in the NT,

¹Muhammed Ata ur-Rahim, *Jesus a Prophet of Islam* (London: MWH London Publishers, 1979), p. 206.

while the Muslims believe the revelation of Jesus in the Qurʾān. While Christians and Muslims have a long history of being at odds with one another, it is interesting to note that surprisingly, the Qurʾān and the NT share much commonality when referring to Jesus Christ. The truth is that Jesus Christ is a common thread between Christians and Muslims. Unfortunately, often conflict comes before conversation, diatribes before dialogue, and Jesus is left in the background.

No one who lives today can deny the obvious conflict between Muslims and Christians. It has always been so. Misunderstanding is the fertile soil out of which conflict takes root. With that in mind, this paper is written to examine the person of Jesus as he is revealed in both the NT and the Qurʾān with the hope that more understanding is established on both sides. There will be no discussion about textual criticism, or the validity of either scripture. The goal is to simply examine what the Qurʾān says about ʿIsa and what the NT says about Jesus, and what the followers of each believe as a result. When Jesus is mentioned, it refers to the person revealed in the NT. When ʿIsa is mentioned, it refers to the person revealed in the Qurʾān. If Christ is mentioned, it refers to both.²

B. His Miraculous Birth

The miraculous birth of Christ is one point where the Qurʾān and the NT agree.³ He was unlike other men. He was not the product of sexual relations between a man and a woman. He was not the product of sexual relations of any kind. He was miraculously conceived in the womb of his mother, Mary, by the will and power of God.

The NT presents the birth of Jesus in Matthew 1: 18-25 and Luke 1:26-39. Luke says:

God sent the angel Gabriel to a virgin named Mary. She was engaged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of King David. Gabriel appeared to her and said, “Greetings, favored woman!

²The author is not making any kind of judgment about whether or not Jesus and ʿIsa are in fact two different people. The author’s use of two names for Christ is only for the purpose of clarity.

³Rudolph Frieling, *Christianity and Islam: a Battle for the True Image of Man* (Edinburgh: Floris Books, 1978), p. 69.

The Lord is with you!” Confused and disturbed, Mary tried to think what the angel could mean. “Don’t be frightened, Mary,” the angel told her, “for God has decided to bless you! You will become pregnant and have a son, and you are to name him Jesus. He will be very great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord will give him the throne of his ancestor David. And he will reign over Israel for ever, and his Kingdom will never end!” Mary asked the angel, “But how can I have a baby? I am a virgin.” The angel replied, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the baby born to you will be holy, and he will be called the Son of God. ... For nothing is impossible with God.” Mary responded, “I am the Lord’s servant, and I am willing to accept whatever he wants. May everything you have said come true.” And the angel left.⁴

The birth of *ʿĪsā* is related in two different places in the Qurʾān, 3: 42-53 and 19:16-36. In 3: 42-45 the Qurʾān says :

And when the angels said: O Mary! See! Allah has chosen you and made you pure, and has preferred you above (all) the women of creation. O Mary! Be obedient to your Lord, prostrate yourself and bow with those who bow (in worship). This is of the news of things hidden.... O Mary! Allah gives you glad tidings of a word from Him, whose name is the Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, illustrious in the world and the Hereafter and one of those brought near (unto Allah). He will speak to mankind in his cradle and in his manhood, and he is of the righteous. 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.⁵

It is not difficult to see the similarities in the two accounts. Jesus’ and *ʿĪsā*’s birth are both announced by an angel to Mary while she was still a virgin. The angel announces the birth by first proclaiming that God has found favor with Mary and then by proclaiming the good news to her (this is in contrast to the bad news that an unmarried woman in

⁴All Bible passages are from the Holy Bible, New Living Translation.

⁵As quoted in Ata ur-Rahim, *Jesus a Prophet*, p. 19-20.

Mary's day and age would receive when she learned of her own pregnancy). In both accounts the angel proceeds to prophesy about the miraculous life the child will have in both accounts. Furthermore, Mary points out the obvious, that she is a virgin and it is not possible for her to have a child. In response, in both accounts, the angel reassures her that what will happen is a miracle that only God can perform, because with God all things are possible.

The major difference is the manner in which the child will live a miraculous and triumphant life. In the NT, it is claimed from the beginning that Jesus would be the Son of God, unlike any other mere human. In contrast, in the Qur'ān, *ʿIsa* is called "one of the righteous", which alludes to him being a prophet. This is confirmed later in the passage, "And (Allah) will make him (*ʿIsa*) a messenger to the Children of Israel, saying: Allah is my Lord and your Lord, so worship Him" (3:46-52).⁶

C. His Miraculous Life

According to both the NT and the Qur'ān, Jesus lived a miraculous life characterized by signs and wonders, titles of great honor being bestowed upon him by God and man, and a life free from sin.

The Qur'ān does not cover the activity of *ʿIsa's* life in any great detail. The miracles and powers he was given are referred to, but not in any great detail as well. But it does provide information about a few key elements of *ʿIsa's* life that allow us to compare it with the life of Jesus in the NT.⁷ In the Qur'ān, *ʿIsa* began a miraculous life early on.⁸ In fact, he was able to speak the words that God gave him while still in the cradle. After *ʿIsa's* birth to the virgin Mary she faced ridicule from other family members. She did not defend herself, but simply pointed to the baby *ʿIsa* in the cradle. *ʿIsa*, spoke to his relatives, defending his derided mother,

See! I am the slave of Allah. He has given me the Book and has appointed me a Prophet, and has made me blessed wherever I may be,

⁶As quoted in Ata ur-Rahim, *Jesus a Prophet*, p. 208.

⁷*Ibid.*, p. 206.

⁸*Ibid.*, p. 27.

and has enjoined on me prayer and almsgiving so long as I remain alive. And (has made me) dutiful toward her who bore me, and has not made me arrogant, unblest. Peace be on me the day I was born, and the day I die, and the day I shall be raised alive! (19:30-33).⁹

This story is not found in the NT. Instead, the earliest story after Jesus' birth is told when he was twelve years old. He made a journey to Jerusalem with his parents for the Passover celebration (a special Jewish Holiday commemorating the Israelites flight from Egypt). When the celebration was over, Jesus' family left the city without him thinking he was with some relatives. When they discovered his absence, they searched in Jerusalem for three days for him and finally found him at the temple participating in a lengthy debate with the religious teachers. The text says, "And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers.... His mother said, 'Why have you done this to us? Your father and I have been frantic, searching for you everywhere.' ... Jesus replied, 'You should have known that I would be in my Father's house'" (Luke 2:41-49). This shows two things: that Jesus had an early understanding of his own identity, calling God his Father, and he had an unusual ability to interpret scriptures, beyond his years.

The life of *ʿĪsā* was characterized by signs and wonders. The miracle of *ʿĪsā* speaking from the cradle was only the first mentioned. His other miracles are listed in summary form: "God said When thou wert creating figures like birds from clay by my permission; when thou wert healing the blind and the leprous by my permission; when thou wert causing the dead to come forth by my permission;... " (5:109-111).¹⁰ In the Hadist, *ʿĪsā's* miracles also include walking on water.¹¹ According to Islamic teaching, *ʿĪsā* was blessed with the power to create life, heal the blind and the leprous, walk on water, and raise the dead from their graves. He was able to do things that normal people could not do.

The same miracles attributed to *ʿĪsā* in the *Qur'ān* were attributed to Jesus in the NT, only in more detail. Jesus healed lepers in Matthew

⁹*Ibid.*, p. 213.

¹⁰Geoffrey Parrinder, *Jesus in the Qur'ān* (Oxford: One World, 1996), p. 83.

¹¹Ata ur-Rahim, *Jesus a Prophet*, p. 222.

8:1-4 and Luke 5:12-15, he healed the blind in Mark 9:22 and Luke 18:35-43, and he raised the dead in Luke 17:11-17 and John 11:38-44. The NT does not mention Jesus breathing life into clay and creating figures like birds, but he does a host of other miracles, including walking on water in Matthew 14:25-32, healing the lame in Luke 5:17-25, and casting out demons Luke 4:31-36. The crowds who followed Jesus knew him as a man who could heal them of their diseases and free them from the bonds of evil spirits on their lives. The NT presents Jesus' miracles as "works" or "signs". They expressed the divine power breaking into history to conquer evil. In the Gospel, Jesus never performed miracles to satisfy curiosity or to promote his immediate interests. His deeds manifested the power of God and the divine promise to deliver people from the forces that afflicted them.¹² The miracles that Jesus performed were signs, like the finger of God, pointing to Jesus, so the world would know that God has the power and the will to conquer evil.

In the Qur'ān, ʿIsa is given many names. He was referred to most often as "*ʿIsa ibn Maryam*" (Jesus Son of Mary). He is also called *As-Sālibīn* (the righteous), *Kalimatullāh* (Word of God), *Ruh Allāh* (Spirit of God), and *Masīh-Allāh* (Christ of God).¹³ The Qur'ān says, "The Messiah, Jesus Son of Mary, was only the messenger of God, and His Word that he committed to Mary and a Spirit from Him.. ." (4:169).¹⁴

Jesus is given similar names in the NT. For example in the first chapter of the Gospel of John, Jesus is called the Word of God. The followers of the Jewish religion believe God's Word is the instrument He uses to create, reveal Himself, and fulfill His will in history. God's Word is also eternal.¹⁵ In Romans, he is the righteous one, who knows no sin. But, one of the most familiar terms for Jesus in the NT is the Messiah.

From the outset of Jesus's ministry, his followers called him the Messiah. In the Hebrew language he is the "*Masiah*" and in Greek,

¹²Mircea Eliade, (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Religion, Vol. 8* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995), p. 18.

¹³Ahmad Deedat, *The Choice*, Vol.1 (Saudi Arabia: Y.A.L.J., 1994), p. 56.

¹⁴Frieling, *Christianity and Islam*, p. 69.

¹⁵Walter A. Elwell, (ed.), *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984), p. 223.

“*Christos*”, hence the name Jesus Christ. The term Messiah has become so ingrained in the concept of Jesus in the NT, most people think of Christ as his family name, not his title. The Messiah is an important concept in the Jewish religion; he is God’s anointed one, the agent of salvation and a kingly deliverer of David’s house.¹⁶ Jesus is called the Messiah in several places in the NT, including Matthew 16:13-21, Mark 8:27-31, Acts 7:52, Romans 1:1, and Hebrews 13:8.

One important aspect about *‘Isa’s* life that is not explicitly stated in the Qur’ān, but is widely accepted in Muslim teachings and in the Islamic concept of prophet-hood is *‘Isa’s* sinless life. In the Qur’ān, *‘Isa* is a great prophet, counted among the righteous. He is one of a long line of prophets. He came to reaffirm the message and guidance of the prophets who came before him and prepare for the guidance and message of the prophet who would come after him (namely Muhammad).¹⁷ Prophets are not ordinary. They are exceptional human beings who have been chosen by God and given a message.¹⁸

Prophets are essentially the best of men, blest with the best of human knowledge and strength.¹⁹ Furthermore, it is intrinsic in the Islamic concept of prophet-hood that prophets be men who are trustworthy, self-denying, beyond reproach, and most importantly faultless. They are not devoured by greed and passion like normal men.²⁰ Additionally it is said of *‘Isa* that he was immune from all lies and sin.²¹ Therefore, because of the nature of *‘Isa’s* mission on earth, it is mandatory that he be above sin, completely faultless in word and deed.

The same is true of Jesus in the NT. There is a strong emphasis on Jesus being sinless and utterly different from all other men.²² Jesus’

¹⁶Eliade, (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, p. 18.

¹⁷Ur-Rahim, *Jesus a Prophet*, p. 208.

¹⁸William Chittick and Sachiko Murata, *The Vision of Islam: the Foundations of Muslim Faith and Practice* (London: LB. Tauris and Co. Ltd, 1996), p. 133.

¹⁹S. Abul Hasan Ali Nawwi, *Islamic Concept of Prophet hood* (Lucknow: Lucknow Publishing House, 1979), p. 133.

²⁰*Ibid.*, p. 82.

²¹Norman Daniel, *Islam and the West* (Oxford: One World Publications, 1997), p. 190.

²²Elwell, (ed.), *Evangelical Dictionary*, p. 221.

sinless life is mentioned in several passages: Hebrews 4:15, 7:26; and I Peter 1:19.

The miraculous life of Christ is well documented. His extraordinary biography began at an early age; he healed the blind and the leprosy, walked on water, and raised the dead. He was called the Word of God, righteous, and the Messiah. Additionally, he led a faultless life in word and deed. Finally, we shall see that his life came to an end in a miraculous way.

D. The Miraculous End to his Life

Despite the differences about Christ's death in the Qur'ān and the NT, it is clear in both texts that Christ's life on earth came to a close in a miraculous way. The NT says that Jesus Christ was crucified, died, came to life again on the third day after his death, and ascended into heaven forty days later. The Qur'ān rejects the crucifixion, and with it the resurrection, but affirms the ascension of ʿIsa to heaven to end his life on earth.²³ Let us look more closely at the differences and similarities between the end of Jesus' time on earth, and that of ʿIsa's.

In the Qur'ān, there is a verse that specifically refutes the proposed death of ʿIsa. The Qur'ān says, "yet they did not slay him, neither crucify him, only a likeness of that was shown to them (4:1 57)."²⁴ There are many interpretations about what this verse means exactly. Traditionally it means that ʿIsa was not crucified, but someone else who resembled him.²⁵ In contrast, the great Muslim Apologetic, Ahmad Deedat suggests that ʿIsa was actually crucified on the cross, but did not die. Deedat suggests that ʿIsa's apparent post-resurrection appearances were not resurrection, but recuperation instead.²⁶ One modern Muslim scholar suggested that a substitute for ʿIsa is not necessarily the meaning of the Qur'ānic text (4:157). It simply means the Jews thought they killed ʿIsa,

²³Ur-Rahim, *Jesus a Prophet*, p.221.

²⁴*Ibid.*, p. 221.

²⁵*Ibid.*, p.18.

²⁶Ahmed Deedat, *The Choice* Vol. 2 (Saudi Arabia: Y.A.L. J., 1994), p. 191.

but God raised him unto himself in a way that we can leave unexplained among other mysteries that are inherent in matters of faith.²⁷

Nonetheless, the traditional view of Qur'an version of *ʿIsa*'s end is that he was not crucified, but someone who resembled him was put to death in his stead. There are several interpretations about who this could be. One account says that: when the soldiers came to arrest *ʿIsa* in the garden a tumult ensued and a confusion followed. The two Jews at the center of the confusion, *ʿIsa* and Judas, were mixed up. Judas was arrested, tried, convicted and crucified in *ʿIsa*'s place. During the ordeal, Judas's appearance was transformed by God in such a way that *ʿIsa*'s mother and closest followers believed him to be *ʿIsa*.²⁸ Others say that God told *ʿIsa* he would raise him up to heaven instead of allowing him to die. *ʿIsa* asked for a volunteer who would agree to be transformed into the likeness of *ʿIsa* and be crucified in his place, then go straight to paradise.²⁹ Others say the man crucified in *ʿIsa*'s place was Simon of Cyrene.³⁰

Whatever interpretation one chooses to believe, it is widely held by most Muslims that the Qur'an teaches that *ʿIsa* did not die a cruel and painful death on a cross. In Muslim thought, it is disrespectful to believe that God would allow one of his prophet's, especially one of the most honored prophets to be crucified.³¹ The death of *ʿIsa* at the hands of the Jews is unfitting.³² Instead, *ʿIsa* was taken up to God; he ascended directly to heaven without dying.³³ "They did not kill him for certain; but Allah took him up to Himself. Allah was ever Mighty and Wise." (4:1 58).³⁴

According to the NT, Jesus was crucified, died, was buried, came to life again on the third day after his death, and ascended to heaven another forty days later. The certainty of the way Jesus' life on earth came to an end in the NT scriptures has never been disputed among

²⁷Parrinder, *Jesus in the Qur'an*, p. 12.

²⁸Ur-Rahim, *Jesus a Prophet*, pp. 36-37.

²⁹Helmut Gatje, *The Qur'an and Its Exegesis* (Oxford: One World, 1997), p. 128.

³⁰Ur-Rahim, *Jesus a Prophet*, p. 37.

³¹Dean C. Halverson, *The Compact Guide to the World Religions* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1996), p.104.

³²Daniel, *Islam and the West*, p. 191.

³³Ur-Rahim, *Jesus a Prophet*, p. 38.

³⁴*Ibid.*, p. 219.

Christians. The crucifixion account is testified to in all four Gospel accounts: Matthew 27:45-61; Mark 15:21-47; Luke 23:26-56; and John 19:16-42. Furthermore, various non-Gospel writers testify to the crucifixion of Jesus, saying that Jesus was put to death under Pontius Pilate in the reign of the Emperor Tiberius also suggesting the involvement of Jewish religious leaders. These sources include: Roman writers Tacitus, Suetonius, and Pliny the Younger, and Josephus the Jewish historian, as well as the epistles of Paul, Peter, John, James, Hebrews among other non-gospel NT texts.³⁵

Jesus was betrayed by one of his own disciples, Judas, arrested, tried and sentenced to death by Pontius Pilate. The Jewish religious leaders were instrumental in pleading the case against Jesus, even though it is clear in the NT that Jesus was an innocent man.³⁶ Then, early on a Friday morning, Jesus was beaten, and hung on a Roman cross, the popular instrument of execution. He died at noon on Friday.

By this time it was noon, and darkness fell across the whole land until three o'clock. The light from the sun was gone. And suddenly, the thick veil hanging in the Temple was torn apart. Then Jesus shouted, "Father, I entrust my spirit into your hands!" And with these words he breathed his last. (Luke 23 :44-46)

Then, on the third day after his death, Jesus came to life again. When some women disciples of Jesus came to his tomb to place the burial spices with the body and they found that he was missing. Two angels were there and they said, "Why are looking for in a tomb for someone who is alive? He isn't here! He has risen from the dead!" (Luke 24:5).

The death of Jesus on the cross and his resurrection as told in the NT is the life-blood of the Christian faith. Without it, there is literally no Christian religion. It is interpreted by the followers of Jesus as accomplishing three things: liberation, expiation, and an act of love. First, Jesus crucifixion and resurrection liberated people from sin, death, and evil. Because Jesus conquered these strongholds, he gave his followers

³⁵Eliade, (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, p. 15.

³⁶Luke 24:47

power to do the same. Second, the death of Jesus represents a sacrificial act that expiated the sins of others and established a new covenant with God, a final sacrifice for all who believe in him. Last of all, the death and resurrection of Jesus was an act of love from a loving God that can transform human hearts and reconcile the broken relationship between God and man.³⁷

According to the NT writers, Jesus completely submitted himself to the will of God and became wholly obedient to death, even death on a cross (Philippians 2:89).³⁸ On the third day after his death, Jesus was raised to life again. Death was not a fitting end for the life of Jesus. While he was humbled first, through his obedience he was eventually exalted when he was resurrected and ascended to heaven to God (Acts 2:29-33). So, like the Qur'anic account, Jesus still lives after he was taken up to heaven to be with God. There he sits, according to Hebrews 1:3, at the right hand of God where he waits to come to earth again.³⁹

Like Jesus in the NT, *ʿĪsā* had a miraculous ending to his life on earth. And also like Jesus in the NT, *ʿĪsā* still lives according to the Qur'ān and he will come again. This brings us to the next glimpse at the life of Jesus: his miraculous second coming.

E. The Miraculous Second Coming

According to the NT, Jesus will return to earth one day. His return is mentioned in Matthew 24 and 25, John 14:3, Acts 1:11, and I Thessalonians 4:15-17. The Judgment day is associated with his Second Coming. He will come to judge the living and the dead.⁴⁰ It is said that all nations will gather before him and he will separate the sheep (the believers) from the goats (the non-believers).⁴¹ The believers will enter heaven, while the unbelievers will be sentenced to eternal torment in hell.

³⁷*Ibid.*, p. 19.

³⁸Halverson, *The Compact Guide*, p. 117.

³⁹Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1981), p. 635. Eliade, (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, p. 207.

⁴⁰Eliade, (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, p. 207.

⁴¹*Ibid.*

In the Muslim tradition, ʿIṣa is seen as the “portent of the Hour of Doom”. He will return at the end of the world to play an important part.⁴² ʿIṣa will be the sign of judgement because his appearance will announce the Hour of Doom (or Judgement). In the Hadith it is reported that ʿIṣa will come down over a mountain in the Holy Land called Afiq and he will kill the Anti-Christ with a spear.⁴³

F. Conclusions about His Life: Two different perspectives

Despite some obvious similarities concerning the miraculous birth, life and end of Jesus’s life, the religions of Islam and Christianity have developed two very different perspectives about Christ. Let us examine a brief summary of the life of Christ in both accounts: In the New Testament, Jesus was a Galilean Jew. His mother was Mary and his earthly father, Joseph. He was born to Mary while she was still a virgin. As a child he was a wise and gifted student of the scriptures at a young age. As an adult, he began to teach and preach, called disciples to follow him, worked miracles, and taught some memorable parables. His teachings, specifically those referring to violation of the Sabbath Day laws, and his actions, specifically his alluding to the fact that he had a special relationship to God the father and in many ways equated himself with God angered the Jewish leaders and religious teachers. While he lived a sinless life, he was, nevertheless betrayed, arrested, interrogated, and condemned by Pontius Pilate, tortured, executed on a cross, and buried the same day. He then rose to life again three days later, and ascended to heaven to sit at the right hand of God where he waits to return to earth again to judge the living and the dead.⁴⁴

In the Qurʿān, ʿIṣa was born to Mary while she was still a virgin. He eloquently spoke the Word of God while he was still in the cradle. He lived a life characterized by miracles and teaching the message of God. He was called the Word of God, the Spirit of God, one of the righteous and the Messiah. As one of the greatest prophets, he brought

⁴²Frieling, *Christianity and Islam*, p. 68.

⁴³Gatje, *The Qurʿān and Its Exegesis*, p. 129.

⁴⁴Eliade (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, p. 17.

the Word of God, in the form of the Gospel. He was immune from lies and sin. He never died, because he was not worthy of death. On the contrary, when the Jews wanted to kill him, he escaped from their hands and ascended to the heavens. There he lives now in the flesh in the presence of God waiting to return on the day of Judgment.⁴⁵

Now, let us examine the conclusions that the followers of Jesus made about him based on his life compared with the conclusions that the followers of Islam have come to regarding the meaning of the life of *ʿĪsa*. It is clear that, seen through history, the two accounts of Christ found in the Qurʾān and the NT have led the respective followers to two very different conclusions.

Following the announcement of Jesus' resurrection from the dead, upon reflection on Jesus' words and deeds, and subsequent post-resurrection appearances by Jesus, the disciples came to the conclusion that Jesus was the Son of God, divinity in flesh, and the savior of the world.⁴⁶ They examined the events of his life, his virgin birth, his miracles, his claims, his teachings, his special relationship with God, the prophecy in the writings of the Prophets, his resurrection, and his ascension, and were faced with no other explanation than, Jesus is God. The followers of Jesus did not invent the divinity of Jesus out of a vacuum of religious necessity. They believed they had clear evidence.

We have already mentioned many of the evidences that prompted Jesus' followers to believe he was God. Most of them are also testified to in the Qurʾān. We must now probe a little deeper into the Bible to examine what other evidences there are that gave Jesus' followers the idea that Jesus was God. First, they believed that the sacred writings they already possessed, the Torah, the Psalms of David, and the other Prophets, all prophesied the person and life of Jesus (Gen. 3:15, 12:1-3; Psalms 2, 22, 45, 72, 110; *ʿĪsa* iah 4:2, 6, 7-9, 11; Micah 1-5, Jeremiah, Daniel, and others).⁴⁷ Jesus himself led his followers through the Bible and taught them all the scriptures that relate to himself beginning in Moses and continuing through all the prophets, according to Luke 24:27.

⁴⁵Daniel, *Islam and the West*, p. 190.

⁴⁶Eliade (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, p. 19.

⁴⁷Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 1, pp. 484-493.

Second, the followers of Jesus believe he is God because of the power he possessed over nature. In addition to the teachings about Jesus' ability to heal in the NT and the Qur'an, he had power over other elements of nature, the wind, the rain, the sea, the animals, the trees, as well as spirits. And when he departed, he conveyed his power to his disciples under the authority of his name alone.⁴⁸

The final evidence that led Jesus' followers to believe in him as God was Jesus own claims about himself. He made promises that only God can make: he promised to be with his followers forever. He promised to hear their prayers. He promised to forgive their sins. And finally, he promised them eternal life if they only believed in him.⁴⁹ Unlike former prophets and the contemporary teachers of Jesus' day, Jesus repeatedly linked the divine offer of salvation not simply to his teaching, but to his own person. Accepting Jesus himself emerged as the divine criterion for human destiny before God.⁵⁰ For a member of the Jewish race, to make this kind of claim would be blasphemy, which is one of the reasons Jesus was so unpopular with the religious leaders of his day.

According to Christian theology, the divinity of Jesus is to the Bible what the soul is to the body. It is a living and all pervading principle. The followers of Jesus believe that Jesus fulfilled the message of the entire Bible, Torah, Psalms, and Prophets. Furthermore, because of the nature of his work it was essential that Jesus be both God and man. His had to fulfill a two-fold purpose. He had to participate in the nature of those he came to save, and possess the power to subdue sin, death, and evil at the same time.⁵¹

To the follower of Jesus, belief in Jesus as God is a natural and normal response to the evidence they have been given. To the Muslim, belief in *Isa* as anything other than a great prophet is blasphemous. Every prophet of Islam delivers a book. Moses brought the Torah, *Isa* the gospel and Muhammad the Qur'an. The Gospel is not the good news about the descent of the Son of God and his redeeming act which

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, p. 501.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, p. 501.

⁵⁰Eliade (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, p. 17.

⁵¹Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 1, p. 483.

changed the world.⁵² Instead, it is simply, yet profoundly, the word of God that proclaims the oneness of God and guides people to righteous living.

Isa was one of the long line of prophets who had been sent to the peoples of this earth. *Isa*'s life was no insignificant occurrence. To the Muslim, *Isa* represents the perfect message of God being sent down to people. *Isa*'s appearance on earth was not an isolated event in a chaotic world, but a messenger sent from God in perfect timing like all the messengers before him.⁵³ The Qur'^{ān} says, "And we caused *Isa*, Son of Mary, to follow in their footsteps, confirming what was before him, and we bestowed on him the Gospel wherein is guidance and light, confirming that which was before it in the Torah— a guidance and an admonition to those who are careful." (5:46)

Isa was a man like Muhammad and Moses, a messenger sent from God to reaffirm and revive the teachings that God gave. He was a prophet, the concept of which, hinges on the idea of "nabi". The word derives from a root that has two basic meanings: 1) to utter a sound, as watchman on the city wall calls out to the people below; 2) to become elevated. Both meanings are present in the Islamic idea of the prophet.⁵⁴ From these two root meanings of the word for prophet, we can examine two main aspects of the Islamic prophet of which *Isa* was one: the character of a prophet (they are elevated), and the message they brought (they call out).

The prophets are marvelously unique among men, because no one on earth possesses the life giving knowledge they possess. They are trustworthy, faultless, self-denying, and beyond reproach.⁵⁵ Prophets are the best of creatures and are blest with the best of human capabilities and strength. They can foretell events which cannot be predicted by other mortals however wise and intelligent they may be. They do not use loquacious speeches to expound on their eligibility to prophethood.

⁵²Frieling, *Christianity and Islam*, p. 63.

⁵³Ata ur-Rahim, *Jesus a Prophet*, p. 206.

⁵⁴Chittick and Sachiko Murata, *The Vision of Islam*, p. 133.

⁵⁵Nawi, *Islamic Concept*, p. 82.

Rather, they speak plainly.⁵⁶ Sheikh Mujaddid al Ifthani writes in a letter, “The prophets are the best of creation, possessing the most precious wealth of knowledge.”⁵⁷ It is completely extraordinary that *Isa* led such a miraculous life, but in the Islamic view of prophet hood *Isa* led a normal life for a great prophet of God. Prophets are not ordinary. They are exceptional men who have been chosen by God and given a message.

What is the message that God has sent down for the prophets such as Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus and Muhammad? In the Qur’ān, it is the simple, yet profound statement, “There is no god but God.”⁵⁸ The Qur’ān says, “We never sent a messenger before thee save that we revealed to him saying, ‘There is no god but I, so worship (21:25). The prophets always come inviting mankind to accept the oneness of God. The fundamental goal of the prophet’s message is to establish proper communion between man and God. They have always preached that God alone had the power to do good or harm and that only he could be the object of worship, prayer, and oblations.⁵⁹ *Isa* brought the same message as the other prophets of God. All the prophets were sent with the guidance that belongs to God and the message is the same:⁶⁰

Say, we have faith in God and in that which has been sent down on Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, and Jacob, and the Tribes, and that which was given to Moses and Jesus and the prophets by their Lord. We make no distinction among any of them, and to Him (Allah) we have submitted.” (2:136; cf 2:285, 3:84).

According to the revelation of *Isa* in the Qur’ān, he was a great prophet of God with a message and a mission like the prophets that came before and after him. The miraculous life he led was a testimony only to this fact. He was only a man. His greatness is not to be confused with divinity. The Qur’ān speaks out in many ways against the belief that *Isa* was the Son of God in 3:55-59; 2:116-117; 21:26-30; 19:88-93.⁶¹

⁵⁶*Ibid.*, pp. 12-21.

⁵⁷*Ibid.*, p. 24.

⁵⁸Chittick and Sachiko Murata, *The Vision of Islam*, p. xxx.

⁵⁹Nawi, *Islamic Concept*, p. 48.

⁶⁰Chittick and Sachiko Murata, *The Vision of Islam*, p. 165.

⁶¹Ur-Rahim, *Jesus a Prophet*, p. 208-210.

The Qurʾān demands reverential regard and affectionate devotion to the prophets of God, a tender feeling of admiration that arises from the core of one's heart.⁶² In conflict with this is the worship of anyone except God. For the Qurʾān states explicitly that God is one and he alone is worthy of worship. The Qurʾān rejects *ʿĪsā's* divinity in 5:17, 5:116-118; and 9:30-32. The Qurʾān says:

And when Allah says: O *ʿĪsā*, son of Mary! Did you say to mankind: Take me and my mother for two gods beside Allah? He says: Be glorified! It was not me to utter that to which I had no right I spoke to them only what you commanded me, (saying): Worship Allah, my Lord and your Lord. (5:116-117).

The Qurʾān also denies the trinity saying :

O people of the Book! Do not exaggerate in your religion nor utter anything concerning Allah except the Truth. The Messiah, *ʿĪsā*, 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 do not say 'Three'—Stop! (It is) Better for you! Allah is only one God. (4: 17 1-173).

G. Final Words

Despite many similarities in the accounts of Jesus in the NT and the account of *ʿĪsā* in the Qurʾān there is a large difference in the beliefs of the followers of Islam and the followers of Jesus about the truth concerning the life of Christ. Islam says *ʿĪsā* is a great prophet blessed by God with a miraculous life and a divine message. The followers of Jesus say he is the Son of God, divinity in the flesh, the redeemer of the world. Through it all we see that Christ is a figure of controversy and has been since the days he traveled the dusty roads of Palestine. He is also a common thread between the two largest religions on this planet. As people interested in understanding and truth, let us all gather around the person of Christ and reexamine who he is. Let us set aside conflict for conversation. For Jesus himself said, "The truth will set you free" (John 18:37).

⁶²Nawi, *Islamic Concept*, p. 94.

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