



Jesus

*in the
Christian and Muslim Faiths*

*Fr. Rafiq Khoury
Dr. Mustafa Abu Sway*

PASSIA

*Palestinian Academic Society for the Study of International Affairs
Jerusalem*

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Palestinian Academic Society for the Study of International Affairs

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Tel: 972-2-6264426 ♦ Fax: 972-2-6282819
E-mail: passia@palnet.com
<http://www.passia.org>
PO Box 19545 ♦ Jerusalem

Contents

Foreword

Dr. Mahdi Abdul Hadi i

Jesus Christ in the Christian Faith

Father Rafiq Khoury 1

Jesus Christ: A Prophet of Islam

Dr. Mustafa Abu Sway 25

Selected Bibliography

Further Reading Sources in English 49

Who is this obscure man who unites so many peoples of opposed mores and languages around his tomb? This obscure man who, born and dead in this small corner of the world, changed the face of the Earth with a Cross?

-François-René de Chateaubriand, 1806

Foreword

Dr. Mahdi Abdul Hadi

Head of PASSIA, Jerusalem

Since the establishment of the Religious Studies Unit at PASSIA ten years ago, we have been very keen to portray the three monotheistic faiths – Muslim, Christian and Jewish – through their holy texts and to encourage all – believers or otherwise – to reflect upon their understanding of the holy text in terms of their language, practice and culture. On the other hand, it has also been our objective to draw the thin line between history, religion and legend.

Of course, we never claim any responsibility or authority in judging people's perceptions, but we are very interested in understanding their points of view. One of the many objectives of the Religious Studies Unit has been to introduce the holy texts in the three monotheistic faiths, and to encourage dialogue among scholars and experts to put forward their interpretations of the texts with the background of historical narrative.

One of the most passionately told and perceived narratives in Christianity as well as in Islam is that of Jesus Christ, or *Isa Ibn Maryam*: his birth, his words and deeds, his disciples and followers and his mother, the Virgin Mary. There have been and continue to be many theologians, scholars and historians writing about Jesus and the narratives of the Virgin Mary from their various perspectives, and I believe this path of research and study to be endless. This encouraged us at PASSIA to try and compile two versions of Jesus's story by Christian and Muslim scholars for our community and to encourage them to go further in understanding people's beliefs in Jesus as well as the Virgin Mary and the special place she holds in the Holy Qur'an.

Jesus invited human beings to love each other as brothers, to forgive each other, to strive for peace and to show humility, mercy and faith. As a teacher for mankind, as a prophet or as the messiah, he was the personification of righteousness and advocated forgiveness for those who act out of ignorance; according to the Christian Bible, he set an example

in the most challenging of circumstances, crying out during his crucifixion, "Forgive them, father! For they know not what they do."

The Islamic narrative does not hold Jesus to be Godly as does its Christian counterpart; according to the Qur'an, "the similitude of Jesus before Allah is as that of Adam; He created him from dust, and then said to him 'Be': and he was." There are, of course, many differences in the narratives concerning Jesus's birth, his crucifixion and death, and his resurrection and ascendance to heaven, but this should not in any way shake or weaken Muslim or Christian faith in Jesus or cast doubt on his heavenly message, and it should especially not separate us through narrow-minded interpretations of our holy texts.

This series of PASSIA monographs on religious prophets serves not only to enrich the academic library, but to provide our communities with the tools to distinguish between the narratives and perspectives of various scholars in the context of the depths of their beliefs, and to help them to avoid the trap of creating or perpetuating myths. This approach has proved essential in our dialogue-based interfaith activities.

I, for one, believe deeply in Jesus, and my faith as a Muslim is complete only if I have full faith and belief in the texts of the Injil (Gospel) and Torah. In addition to my belief in the Qur'an and in the prophetic traditions, it is Jerusalem, Bethlehem and Nazareth; the holy places; Palestinian Christians and the harmony in the coexistence of our societies, which have been empowering my belief in Jesus Christ. It is my ambition to enhance this academic, social and religious environment by encouraging my colleagues to continue to communicate their perspectives in a spirit of sharing, humility and mutual respect.

Jesus Christ in the Christian Faith

Father Rafiq Khoury

Latin Patriarchate, Jerusalem

INTRODUCTION

Jesus Christ is at the heart of Christian faith. The Christian is essentially any individual who believes in Jesus Christ [faith], lives in unity with Him and according to His teachings [life], celebrates Him in liturgy and holy sacraments [celebration], and witnesses to His words and actions [witness]. Furthermore, Jesus Christ is the focal point of salvation history, being the core of God's action in history for mankind's salvation. The Old Testament paves the way for Him and the New Testament derives from Him. He is the "Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end, the first and the last" (Rev. 22:13).

Who is Jesus Christ according to our faith as Christians? What are His teachings and acts? What do our Churches in the East say about Him today?¹

1. THE IDENTITY OF JESUS CHRIST

From Experience to Writing

In the beginning, Christ was a life experience that a group of people had lived (disciples, apostles and others who followed Him),

¹ All the literature referred to in this article is in Arabic.

“What was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the Word of life...” (1 Jn 1:1).

The teachings of Jesus that they heard and the acts that they saw were the essence of that experience. However, the core of the experience was Jesus’s death and resurrection, which shed light on all that He had taught and done.

After Jesus’s ascension to heaven, the experience turned into good news that the disciples spread everywhere through oral preaching in their capacity as eyewitnesses, “This Jesus God raised up, and of that all of us are witnesses” (Acts 2:32).

This oral preaching was later written down somewhere between 50 and 100 AD by these eyewitnesses or by their disciples whom we call evangelists in order to transmit the good news to future generations. Luke the Evangelist says at the beginning of his gospel,

“Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed on to us by those who, from the beginning, were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, I too decided, after investigating everything carefully, from the very first, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed” (Luke 1: 1-4).

The New Testament contains 27 books and is considered the primary and basic source for Christian faith. The books include the Gospel According to St. Matthew, the Gospel According to St. Mark, the Gospel According to St. Luke, the Gospel According to St. John, the Acts of the Apostles, 21 epistles of Paul and the other apostles, and the Book of Revelation.

The Identity of Christ in the Four Gospels

Christians use the term ‘mystery’ when they refer to the Lord Jesus. The term suggests “the boundless riches of Christ” (Eph 3:8). This may explain why the early apostles wrote four books about Jesus Christ, each looking at Jesus from a different perspective. But the four books are complementary in that they present to us a complete picture of Jesus’s identity. Nevertheless, the gospels are unanimous on the essential aspects

of Jesus's identity, which St. Mark summed up at the beginning of his gospel, "The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God" (Mk 1:1). This verse provides three names for the identity of Jesus used throughout the four gospels: *Jesus, Christ, Son of God*.²

- Jesus:

The proper name 'Jesus' was widespread during the time of Christ, at least until the beginning of the 2nd century AD. Thus the adjective Nazarene was added to the name 'Jesus' in order to distinguish Him from other people with the same name, defining him by the place of His residence. The name 'Jesus' refers to the fact that Jesus Himself was one of the people, an ordinary man like them, resembling them in everything. But the name itself has its meaning as is the custom in the East. He was given the name by a divine wish when the Angel Gabriel said, "Call Him Jesus" (Mt 1:21). The name 'Jesus' means 'savior' and is explained: "he shall save his people from their sins" (Mt 1:21). The name therefore reveals the identity and message of Jesus.

At any rate, soon those who knew Jesus discovered that He was more than just human. When He appeared before people teaching them and working among them, they were full of amazement to see what He did (i.e. his miracles) and said (i.e. his teachings). They wondered among themselves who this man was,

"What is this? A new teaching – with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him" (Mk 1:27);
"Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?" (Mk 4:41);
"They were all amazed and glorified God, saying, 'We have never seen anything like this'" (Mk 2:12).

All this drove the people to see in Jesus more than simply an ordinary person.

² For more information about these names see *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, the Arabic edition, Beirut 1999; *Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, translated into Arabic by a group of professors, Beirut 1985, the term 'Jesus', pp. 867-874; Father Salim Boustros, *Christian Theology and Modern Man*, Part I, Beirut 1984, pp. 131-154; Walter Kasper, *Jesus Christ*, translated by Bishop John Mansour, Beirut 2000, pp. 269-370; Father Piergiorgio Gianazza, "Jesus the True Man Reveals Himself a True God and Son of God," *Al-Liqa' Journal*, number 4/1995, pp. 24-45.

- The promised Christ (Messiah):

Christians also add to the proper name 'Jesus' the term 'Christ' to identify Him and His teachings. 'Christ' means 'the anointed one' whom God anointed with holy oil and dedicated to a special mission (as in the case of kings, priests and also prophets). Gradually, then, the concept of the promised Christ (messiah), who would bring with Him salvation to mankind, developed in the Old Testament (see Daniel 9:25-26)³.

At the time of Jesus, people were waiting eagerly for the coming of the Christ. However, the concept of the promised Christ (Messiah) had gained a mundane significance due to the political situation that prevailed at the time. People were waiting for an earthly Christ who would bring back glory and greatness to the Kingdom of Israel. Jesus Christ resisted strongly this understanding. After the miracle of the feeding of the five-thousand (the multiplication of bread; see John chapter 6), the multitude believed Jesus was this promised Christ so they wanted to come and take Him by force to make him a king, but He "withdrew again to the mountain by himself" (Jn 6:15). This is a clear indication that God sent His son Jesus to the earth for a mission of a different sort.

When Jesus began His public life on earth, people were amazed at His holiness, authority and power. They wondered, "He cannot be the Messiah, can he?" (Jn 4:29). Some even said emphatically, "This is the Messiah" (7:41). After his first meeting with Jesus, Andrew ran to his brother Simon and said to him, "We have found the Messiah, which is translated Christ" (Jn 1:41). Similarly, when Jesus met with the Samaritan woman, she said, "I know that Messiah is coming, who is called Christ" (...) Jesus said to her, "I am he, the one who is speaking to you" (Jn 4:25-26). Later, He asked His disciples, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Messiah" (Mk 8:29). Finally, at His trial, Caiaphas, the high priest asked Him, "I put you under oath before the living God, tell us if you are the Messiah, the Son of God." Jesus said to him: "You have said so" (Mt 26:63-64).

- Son of God:

Christians use the phrase 'Son of God' as one of the names of Jesus Christ, and they consider this name one of the foundations of their faith. It

³ Look up the term 'Messiah' in the *Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, pp. 741-745.

is the faith declared by Peter the apostle, "You art the Messiah, the Son of the living God" (Mt 16:16), and declared by Paul the apostle, "And immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying: He is the Son of God" (Acts 9:20). The Christian faith is founded on the four gospels and they all stress systematically the nature of Jesus as the Son of God.⁴ Even Jesus Himself declared publicly at his trial that He was the Son of God. "All of them asked: Are you, then, the Son of God. He said to them: You say that I am" (Lk 22:70).

Jesus Christ is the Son of God not in the figurative sense of the Old Testament but in the true sense, otherwise the Jews would not have wanted to stone Him (Jn 10:33). Christians do not understand the term 'Son of God' in the carnal and human sense because God is spirit. The birth of Jesus is a spiritual birth in the same way the idea is the child of the brain, the word is the child of the idea, and the light is the child of the sun. These are metaphors that Christians resort to in their interpretation of this aspect of Jesus Christ's identity.⁵ This birth is eternal and has no beginning. The Father is eternal and so is the Son.⁶ "He is begotten of the Father before all worlds,"⁷ the Nicene Creed says.

The Incarnation: True God, True Man

Christians sum up their belief in Jesus Christ by saying that He is a true God and a true man, complete in his divinity and in his humanity. This is what Christians call the "mystery of incarnation".⁸

⁴ See for example, Mk 1:1; Mt 16:16; Jn 20:31; Lk 1:35; Mk 15:39, and others.

⁵ See Boulos Khoury, *The Incarnate Word for Christians*, Vol. 1, Junieh 2004, pp. 163-223. Al-Boushi says, "He is born like light from the sun" (p. 223). See also Father Rafiq Khoury, *What is Christianity?* In *Arab Christian-Moslem Heritage Conference (9-11 September 1983)*, Al-Liqa' Center Publications 1983, p. 64.

⁶ See Walter Kasper, *Jesus Christ*, pp. 286-291.

⁷ In addition to these basic names (Jesus, Christ, Son of God) there are other names Christians use to call Jesus such as Lord, Son of Man, Prophet, King, the Word. These names are related in one way or another to those we have just mentioned. See Salim Boustros, *Christian Theology and Modern Man*. Pp. 140-145, 152.

⁸ See *Dogmas of Christianity*, translated by Bishop Cyril Salim Boustros, Beirut 1986, pp. 183-186; *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, pp. 152-158; Joseph Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christian Faith*, translated by Dr. Nabil Khoury, Beirut 1994, pp. 149-152; Piergiorgio Gianazza, *Jesus the True Man*, pp. 34-45.

Christians depend on the gospels for their faith, which they regard as the revealed word of God and thus a foundation for their belief. John the Evangelist sums up this doctrine at the beginning of his gospel where he says, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God ... And the Word became flesh, and lived among us" (Jn 1:1.14). Throughout the generations, Christians remained loyal to these two poles of Jesus's identity. He is true God ("the Word was God") and true man ("the Word became flesh").

Jesus Christ is a true man. Like all people, He walks, drinks, eats, sleeps, feels joy, cries, shows pity, yearns, gets angry, prays, feels sad and fears...⁹ We can actually specify the human identity of Jesus: He was born in Bethlehem, lived in Nazareth with Mary and Joseph; he was a carpenter, and when he was thirty years of age He started preaching the good news all over Palestine and gathering around Him disciples; he was sentenced to death by Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of Palestine.¹⁰

He is also true God. His own words indicate this and He often declared that He was equal to God, "I and my Father are one" (Jn 14: 9). This is also true of His actions: He forgives sins though God alone can forgive sins. Jesus said to the paralyzed man, "Your sins are forgiven." And the people understood the meaning of His words and complained saying, "Why does this fellow speak in this way? It is blasphemy! Who can forgive sins but God alone" (Mk 2:7). Jesus could also perform miracles in His own name (see Mk 9: 45), especially the raising of the dead that shows that Jesus Himself is the Lord of life and death (see, for example, the resurrection of Lazarus, Jn 11). As a result, people started to wonder, "By what authority are you doing these things? Who gave you this authority to do them?" (Mk 11: 28). The divinity of Jesus is also clear in His manner of teaching, particularly in Matthew chapter 5 where Jesus speaks with authority, "It was said to those of ancient times..." (the speaker being the Old Testament), "while I say to you" (the speaker being Jesus Christ) (Matt 5:21.27).

From the Gospels to Church Tradition

The gospels do not present a scientific theological study; they are rather a proclamation of the good news as it was manifested in the figure of Jesus,

⁹ See for example Lk 10:21; Mk 9:36; Lk 7:13; Jn 11:33-35; Matt 16:23; Matt 26:38.

¹⁰ See Father Piergiorgio Gianazza, *Jesus the True Man*, p. 35.

in His teachings and acts. Even though the gospels contained the Christian faith in all its aspects, matters were not that simple. Teachings and writings that contradicted the gospels regarding the identity, teachings and acts of Jesus appeared. But the Church has always adhered to the two poles we referred to earlier: Jesus as completely man and Jesus as completely God. Any teachings that depreciated His divinity or His humanity were rejected by the Church, whose task it was to clarify all ambiguity regarding the true teaching in order to transmit it to the faithful.¹¹

In this respect, eccentric teachings, called heresies, appeared between the 3rd and the 6th centuries. Some of the heresies denied the divinity of Jesus (Arius and Arianism, for instance), while others denied the humanity of Jesus (Docetism, which says that Jesus was not human but seemed to be).

In the face of the doctrinal challenge, the Church stood clear and determined because she believed those heresies denied, contradicted and even blew the Christian doctrine off its foundation. She therefore held ecumenical councils to delineate the true faith. The most important councils were the Council of Nicaea (325 AD), the Council of Constantinople (381), the Council of Ephesus (431), and the Council of Chalcedon (451).¹² In addition, great figures appeared, known for their sanctity and knowledge (called Fathers of the Church) who defended the true Christian faith, in the East: Athanasius, Cyril of Alexandria, Cyril of Jerusalem, Basil, Gregory, John Chrysostom, and others, and in the West: Leo the Great, Augustine, Jerome, and others.

The teachings that contradicted true Christian faith provided the Church with the opportunity to clarify Christian faith regarding Jesus Christ on the basis of the Holy Scriptures and in-depth study deriving its concepts from Greek philosophy: one hypostasis or person with two natures, divine and human. The union between the divine and human natures is, according to the Council of Chalcedon, a union between "two natures without confusion and that are unchangeable, indivisible and inseparable. The

¹¹ Regarding the Christian tradition related to Jesus Christ, see Fadel Sidarous, *Jesus Christ in Church Tradition*, Beirut, 3rd edition 1999, especially pp. 45-127; see also Father Salim Boustros, *Christian Theology and Modern Man*, pp. 166-184.

¹² The term 'ecumenical' is derived from the Greek word *oikoumene* meaning populated areas as the ancients defined it, and it referred basically to the Mediterranean coast. Ecumenical synods are church assemblies from different parts of the world and in which bishops meet together to look into doctrinal, administrative or liturgical matters, among others.

difference in the natures is not annulled by their unity, each retains its characteristics, but both came together in one person and one hypostasis.”¹³ The Church summed up her faith in the creed which encompasses all of Christian doctrine, called the Nicene-Constantine Creed because it was formulated in these councils. This creed is the reference of faith for all Christians, and it is recited by believers all over the world during the liturgy on Sunday. Thus ‘church tradition’ developed during the first seven centuries and is regarded by both Eastern and Western Churches as a main reference for true Christian faith. On the other hand, unfortunately, the schism in the body of the Church resulted from doctrinal debates. Thus the Church divided and scattered, especially in the East.¹⁴

From Church Tradition to Theological Thinking

The development and spread of Christianity was accompanied by theological thought that aimed at studying Christian doctrines in depth in order to design a consummate and harmonious theological system that would address the human mind. Thus from the beginning theological schools were established, the most important of which were the schools of Antioch, Alexandria and Nisibis. These schools also had their eminent figures like Cyril of Alexandria, John Chrysostom, Ephrem the Syriac and many others. Throughout the years, theology developed into an independent field of study.

The part of theology that deals with the personality of Jesus Christ is called Christology, which is also a basic component of any theological system. This part delves into questions concerning Jesus Christ: How can Jesus be the Son of God and the son of Man at the same time? Does He have one or two hypostases? Does He have one or two natures? How do these natures unite? This theological thinking derives from Greek thought (Aristotle, Plato and others) plus other old and modern philosophies. This wide range of thinking generated widespread theological thought called,

¹³ See Council of Chalcedon statement in *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, pp. 154-155.

¹⁴ It has become known that the schism and division were caused, in many cases, by difference of opinion about the meaning of words. The words ‘nature’ or ‘hypostasis’ for example meant one thing in Greek and a completely different thing in Syriac, causing doctrinal controversy and confusion. Churches today avoid doctrinal differences and stress that faith in Jesus Christ one and the same despite terminological differences. See in this respect *Contemporary Agreements about Christ*, in Al-Liqa’ Journal, numbers 3-4/2004, pp. 31-86.

as we said above, Christology.¹⁵ In general this thought, especially the part that deals with Jesus Christ, has reached its peak in what is known as “scholastic theology” represented mainly by St. Augustine (354–430 AD) and St. Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274).

This theological thought was transmitted from one generation to another, proceeding from historical, intellectual and cultural developments. Theological thought went along with these developments and tried to gain a deeper understanding of Jesus’s identity, His teachings and acts. Until today, this trend of thought occupies a good portion of the Christian world.¹⁶ Arab Christian thought, which developed between the 8th and 14th centuries, also contributed to this theological thought within the prevailing cultural and religious circumstances in the East, and produced original thought about all topics related to Jesus Christ. Unfortunately, however, this thought remains stored in libraries in spite of the efforts made during the past few years to publish it¹⁷ and to found a contemporary Christology in our churches in the Arab East that stems from the basic traditional Christological elements and reaches out to the concerns of the Arab individual that have to be taken into account when trying to formulate a Christology in our region.

2. THE MESSAGE OF CHRIST: HIS TEACHINGS

When Jesus Christ started teaching, all those who were around him discovered it was a new kind of teaching that was interesting, amazing and wonderful at the same time. “They were astounded at his teaching: for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes” (Mk 1:22). “They were all amazed and they kept on asking one another: What is this? A new teaching with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him” (Mk 1:27). “Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to Him?” (Mk 6: 2).

What is this teaching? And what is new and wonderful about it?

¹⁵ See Fadel Sidarous, *Jesus Christ in Church Tradition*, p. 9 and pp. 131-133.

¹⁶ We find a summary of contemporary theological thought about Jesus Christ in Father Mansour Al-Mukhalisi's *Contemporary Christ: The Mystery of Jesus' Identity in the Writings of Twentieth-Century Theologians*, Baghdad 2004, p. 264. See also Fadel Sidarous, *Jesus Christ in Church Tradition*, pp. 137-148.

¹⁷ About the contribution of this Christian thought see Boulos Khoury, *The Word Incarnate among Christians*, 2 volumes, Jounieh 2004, pp. 420, 363.

The Kingdom of God

Jesus was traveling throughout Palestine teaching the multitudes about the Kingdom of God. The multitudes gathered around Him in whom they saw a good teacher, addressing Him thus, "Teacher" (Matt 12:16). Matthew collected many of Jesus's important teachings in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5, 6, 7), which starts with what came to be called the Beatitudes because each verse begins with the word "blessed" (Matt 5:1-12).

The teachings of Jesus can be summed up under one title, namely, the Kingdom of God: "The time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God has come near" (Mk 1:15; Matt 4:17).

What is God's Kingdom? What does it mean and what are its characteristics?¹⁸

Jesus did not give an abstract meaning to the Kingdom of God, but he interpreted it through parables, "The Kingdom of heaven may be compared to..." (Matt 13:24), which occurs particularly in Matthew's gospel, in chapter 13 and other chapters in the four gospels. God's Kingdom is compared to a mustard seed that grows (Matt 13:31-32), the yeast that leavens the whole dough (Matt 13:33), the treasure for which the individual sacrifices all he has to have it (13:44-45), and the wheat and tares that grow together until the day of harvest, i.e. judgment day (Matt 13:24-30, 36-40). God's Kingdom begins here on earth and is consummated in heaven (like the net, Matt 13:47-50). In fact, the Kingdom of God is this new world that God planted on earth in Jesus Christ, and which begins on earth and reaches its culmination in heaven.

What are the features of God's Kingdom? What is new about it?

We can sum up the answers to these questions in these phrases: a new revelation about God, a new relation with the other (neighbor), a new relation with self, and a turnabout in human values.

¹⁸ About the meaning and concept of God's Kingdom see Walter Kasper, *Jesus Christ*, pp. 127-151; *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, pp. 175-180; Bishop Youssef Raya and Cyril Boustros, *Incarnation: A Flood of Love*, Beirut 1993, pp. 143-151; the term 'Kingdom' in *Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, pp. 769-774.

New Revelation about God

The human being is always yearning to know God, "my soul thirsts for you" (Psalm 63:2). The individual knew God intuitively by meditating upon the creation around him, and knew God through revelation when God took the initiative and introduced Himself to people. God talked to people indirectly through the work of His hands, and directly through His prophets whom he sent to guide mankind. People called God by different names, e.g. holy, alive, wise, omnipotent, omniscient, etc., and each name reveals one of God's characteristics, but the divine nature of God remains beyond our understanding.

This is the context in which God's revelation was made to the world through Jesus Christ. What distinguishes Jesus is that He is not simply the Word about God but the Word of God and the "Word was God" (Jn 1:1). John adds, "No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made Him known" (Jn 1: 18). And Jesus Himself says, "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father" (Jn 14: 9).

In this respect we can say that Jesus revealed the most beautiful name of God and portrayed the most sublime picture of Him, which John the evangelist summed up in his first epistle saying, "God is love and those that abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them" (1 Jn 4:16). Love crowns and assimilates and sublimates all the names of God.

In order for Jesus to express this sublime portrait of God, He called Him Father, and the word suggests love, tenderness, mercy, concern and care¹⁹ (see Matt 5:45; 6:9; 6:25-34; 7: 7-11). Praying to God, Jesus calls Him "Abba" (the word that a child uses to call on his father). In His parables, Jesus described the "heavenly Father" as a person full of compassion and love; He goes out in search of His lost son (the Prodigal Son, Lk 15:1-7) and is filled with joy when his son comes back home, and He welcomes him and forgives all his sins (the Prodigal Son, Lk 15:11-32). Jesus also reflects the image of the Father who loves sinners in His attitude toward the sinful woman (Jn 8:1-11). And when Jesus teaches His disciples to pray, He counseled them to call God "Father". "Pray then in this way: Our Father in heaven..." (Matt 6: 9).

¹⁹ See Father Piergiorgio Gianazza, "O Jesus: Show Us the Father," *Al-Liqa' Journal*, number 2/1999, pp. 20-60.

This is the new image of God that will completely renew our relation with God.

New Relation with the Other: Each Person is my Brother

In the same way as Jesus revealed a sublime image of God, He, at the same time, brings people together and calls for a brotherly relation among them overcoming all obstacles that separate people from each other (see the parable of the Good Samaritan, Lk 10:25-37). The other is the “neighbor” (see for instance Mk 12:28-34) and the “brother” (see Matt 5:21-24). This new picture of the other is made clear in Jesus’s teachings and behavior.

Jesus was open and loving in his behavior, especially with the disadvantaged and marginalized people of the society. He brought to them their human dignity overcoming all geographical, national, religious and social obstacles: children (see Mk 10:13-16); Samaritans (Jn 4); sinners (Zachaeus, Lk 19:1-10); the prostitute (Jn 8:1-11); the sick and the lepers who were excommunicated but whom Christ came close to, touched and healed (Matt 8:1-4); and holders of humble professions (shepherds, tax collectors and others). Jesus came close to all people, talking to them, listening to them and healing them from their physical and spiritual sicknesses. Thus Jesus laid the foundation stone for human relationships, free from prejudices, stereotypes and distortion.

In His teachings, Jesus brought down all obstacles that separate people from each other, “For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same?” (Matt 5:46-47). Jesus called for forgiveness and giving in dealing with the other and He set a golden rule for human interaction, “In everything do to others what you would have them do to you” (Matt 7:12). This kind of love is not simply a fleeting feeling, but it means concrete and sincere support of each other especially those who suffer and are in need: feeding the hungry, giving the thirsty water to drink, taking in the stranger, clothing the naked, visiting the sick, and visiting those who are in prison (see Matt 25:31-46). Jesus saw that the human being was much more important than the law, for example, and the individual more important than the Sabbath (Mk 2:27-28). Jesus went as far as to declare what no one else in history has ever declared before, namely, loving one’s enemy (Matt 5:43-48).

New Relation with the Self

The teachings of Jesus are based on the triangle which constitutes human life: relation with God, relation with the other, and relation with self. In terms of one's relation with self, Jesus did not emphasize only the external rituals that the individual practices in order to attain purity, but He went deeper, to the roots of good and evil, to the heart of man. When a debate ensued between Him and the Pharisees and scribes about what was clean and unclean, Jesus said to them, "It is what comes out of a person that defiles. For it is from within, from the human heart that evil intentions come" (Mk 7:20-21). Thus He sought to mold the human heart from inside for "where your treasure is, there will your heart be also" (Matt 6: 21).

In addition to the external application of God's commandments, Jesus called for the purification of the human heart and intentions. Therefore, it is not enough to fulfill the duty of friendship toward others, but to do it generously and gratuitously (see Matt 6:1-4). And if we pray, we should pray not so that people see us (Matt 6:5-8); if we fast, not for appearances before people (see Matt 6:16-18). Avoiding fornication is not limited to external behavior but includes also the internal intentions of the heart, "Who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (Matt 5:27). Purity is the cleanliness of the heart, "Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God" (Matt 5:8). In this way, the human loves God "with all his heart" (Matt 22:37), and forgives his brother "from the bottom of his heart" (Matt 18:35). Jesus presented Himself as "meek and lowly" (Matt 11:29). We can delve into the depth of God's mysteries in a heart full of meekness and affability (see Lk 10:21).

Revolution in Human Values

Jesus revolted against all negative values in society practiced by individuals or groups, and proposed a new way of life that opposed what was acceptable and agreed upon in daily life and in human relations. Perhaps the Beatitudes (Matt 5:1-12) are a prime example of this. There, where oppression of the poor, the glorification of might, the exercise of power, the temptation of the consumptive spirit, and all other unethical human behavior that lead to war, destruction and killing prevailed, Jesus called for the option of the poor, meekness, humility, purity of heart, peace, reconciliation, forgiveness, love and justice.

Jesus developed a whole system of human values that sublimates the individual and reforms society. He fought against all forms of aggressive behavior in human life such as domination and control of the other, stressing that authority is meant to serve people not to oppress them (see Mk 10:33-37; Lk 14:7-11). Jesus also rejected wealth and riches in the life of man, "No one can serve two masters... You cannot serve God and wealth" (Matt 6:24). Indeed He regarded riches as an impediment to entering God's Kingdom (see Mk 10: 22-27).

Jesus put everything in its place for the service of man and not his enslavement. He did not address directly social, political, cultural and economic issues that govern human life, but He set up principles that have the greatest impact on the individual and collective human life.

This is God's Kingdom that Jesus called for. It is a world of reconciliation with God, the neighbor, self and society. Thus Jesus has put down the foundation for human and social development toward the best and the creation of a world based on sublime values.

3. THE MESSAGE OF JESUS: ACTS

The teachings of Jesus are spiritually and humanely sublime. His words were compatible with His acts, and the purpose of what He did was the salvation of man and freeing him from evil.

What are these acts?

Call for Liberation

We mentioned that the meaning of the name 'Jesus' is the 'savior', "To you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord" (Lk 2:11). Jesus came to free people from sin and evil that are innate in the individual and in society (see Lk 4:14-21). Jesus roamed all the cities and villages doing good: "He went about doing good" (Acts 10:38) because God sent Him to "save the world" (Jn 3:17). This is exactly what Christians declare in the creed saying, "For us and for our salvation."

Jesus consummated this salvation in His teachings first, "I say these things so that you may be saved" (Jn 5:34). He called upon people to repent and to change their lives and do good. The call to repentance was the first word that came out of Jesus's mouth at the beginning of His public

life (see Mk 1:15). He explained to the people the conditions for repentance and the way to it (see Matt 5, 6, 7).

But Jesus also worked for the release of the sinful people he met: he released the sinful woman from the evil she had fallen into (Jn 8:1-11) and the Samaritan woman from her self isolation (Jn 4), and Zachaeus the tax collector from his injustice and oppression (Lk 19:1-10).

The gospels talk about the struggle between Jesus and the devil. Jesus overcame all temptations (Matt 4:1-11) and released those who were under the influence of the devil (see for example Lk 9:37-43). This has much significance since the devil is God's enemy and tries to dominate man and turn him away from God. Jesus overcame the forces of evil represented in Satan and brought hope to all around Him, stressing that they also could, with the help of God, overcome the evil forces that are innate in them and in the world.

The Miracles

The miracles²⁰ of Jesus occupy a good part of the gospels (see for example Matt 8, 9). They are plainly narrated and void of exaggerated and fabulous scenes that characterize early miracle narratives. In addition, the miracles of Jesus are full of variety; for example, healing of the sick (leprosy: Matt 8: 1-4; hemorrhage: Matt 9: 20-22), controlling natural forces (abating the storm: Matt 8: 23-27; walking on water: Matt 22-33), exorcising evil spirits (Matt 8: 28-27), healing the blind and dumb (Mk 7: 31-37; Mk 10: 46-52), and, most importantly, the resurrection of the dead (the son of the widow of Nain: Lk 7:11-17; the resurrection of Lazarus; Jn 11).

But this does not mean that Jesus was a doer of miracles like the sorcerers who lived during His time and came from different cultures. At times we see Him reject performing miracles (for example, Matt 12:38; Mk 8:11) because He did not desire to impress people and be mistaken by them as a sorcerer who stupefies people with supernatural acts.

The miracles of Jesus are important because they carry with them the meaning of salvation. Their aim is to urge us to meditate and strengthen our faith. They also refer to Jesus's divine identity (Lk 7:18-24; Mk 2:1-12), the actualization of God's Kingdom in the human world (Lk 11:29;

²⁰ About the miracles of Jesus, see the term 'miracle' in *Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, pp. 747-753; Walter Kasper, *Jesus Christ*, pp. 153-169; Several Authors, *Miracles in the Bible*, translated by Father Sobhi Hamawi sj, Beirut 1986, p. 71.

Matt 12:28), the transfiguration of “God’s gentleness and His love to mankind” (Titus 3:4), His mercy to those who suffer and are full of pain (Matt 9:35-36; 14:15), and the triumph of life over death (the resurrection of Lazarus, Jn 11). Thus in many cases people are amazed and glorify God (Lk 17:15). The miracles of Jesus are signs that He is the promised Messiah who will come to free people from their physical and spiritual evil.

His Death and Resurrection

The most important act of Jesus was His death and resurrection for the salvation of mankind. The death and resurrection of Jesus are the core of Christian faith, celebrated during Easter time. The word for Easter in Arabic (meaning “*fish*”, like the English Paschal) derives from the Hebrew word for “passing over,” (i.e. Jesus’ Passover from death to life). Easter is the most important Christian feast.

- Salvation meaning in Jesus's death:

The gospels relate in detail the events of Jesus’s crucifixion and death (Matt 27, 28; Mk 14, 15; Lk 22, 23; Jn 18, 19).

God brought salvation to all mankind (1 Tm 2:4). This will for the salvation of mankind became clear in Jesus Christ,

“For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him may not perish, but may have eternal life. Indeed God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world but in order that the world might be saved through him” (Jn 3:16-17).

What highlights the salvation quality of Jesus’s agony and death is the innate love found in the great sacrifice, “For God so loved the world ...” (Jn 3: 16); “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (Jn 15:13). At the beginning of the passion narrative, John says in his gospel,

“Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that His hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end” (Jn 13:1).

- *Jesus's resurrection and its meaning:*

Christians have never separated Jesus's death from His resurrection; both form a complementary and connected part of Jesus's salvation mission (see Philippians 2:6-11). Resurrection is the crowning of the salvation act, and Christians stress in the creed that "He rose from the dead on the third day according to Holy Scriptures." The gospels relate the resurrection of Jesus immediately after His death (Matt 18:1-20; Mk 16:1-20; Lk 24:5-10; Jn 20, 21).

The death of Jesus would have been considered a grave failure without His resurrection. In brief, resurrection gives meaning to the death of Jesus; it is a triumph over death and a door of hope to believers in eternal life as well as a crowning of Jesus's mission on earth and a consummation of the promises and prophecies of the Old Testament (the Creed says "according to the Holy Scriptures"). Resurrection is the strongest proof for the divinity of Jesus and it is the principle and foundation of our coming resurrection.

- *Return of Jesus in glory:*

Without eternal life the message of Jesus would not have been completed. Christians believe that human life does not end in nothingness or emptiness; they regard life as a passage to eternal life. What concerns us in this respect is the belief that Jesus will come again in glory at the end of times. In the same way as Jesus is the Alpha ("In the beginning was the word," Jn 1:1), He is also the Omega (the creed says, "And He shall come again, with glory, to judge the living and the dead; whose kingdom shall have no end"). The return of Christ at the end of times is a beginning of a "new heaven and a new earth" (Rev. 21:1) where God will be "everything and in everything" (2Cor 15:28), and eventually the spirit of God will be poured out over all mankind. Christian liturgies describe God's Kingdom as "a Kingdom of truth and life, a Kingdom of holiness and grace, a Kingdom of righteousness, love and peace." Thus believers live on this earth whilst their eyes gaze upwards but without forgetting earthly matters of the world and of history. They live on this earth and take the road that leads to God's Kingdom and eternal life. The Creed says at the end, "We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen."

5. JESUS CHRIST IN EASTERN CHURCHES TODAY

In the East and in Palestine in particular, mankind lived the unique experience that Jesus founded through His incarnation on the earth. Out of this experience emerged the Eastern Churches that developed throughout history. We have seen that the identity of Jesus Christ was the focal point of all theological debates in the East during the first few centuries. At all times these Churches found themselves before the face of Jesus, meditating upon it and witnessing for it in accordance with the historical conditions of each stage. Until today these Churches are contemplating the face of Jesus in the light of the changing circumstances, and are discovering in the mystery of Jesus Christ what helps them to go ahead with regard to their historical mission, with hope, security and true joy.

Here I would like to mention briefly some of the features of Christ's mystery that Eastern Churches tend to contemplate because of their importance at this specific time in the history of the Arab world. The pastoral letters of the Eastern Catholic Patriarchs present a documented vision of the face of Jesus at this historical stage. In many of their aspects, the letters contain the seeds of a contemporary Christology in the context in which Eastern Churches exist. Here we will mention these seeds knowing that they demand further theological investigation in order to discover their real significance.

From Incarnate Christ to Incarnate Church

The letters of the Eastern Catholic Patriarchs continuously refer to the mystery of the incarnation in which they find "the foundation and the model that the Christian community should follow in their life on earth."²¹ From this perspective, the letter lays the foundations of an incarnate Church "in the context of time and place and all related historical, geographical, social and cultural dimensions." From this "tangible human reality," we can take the Church's "special features and character which reflect on her call and mission now and here."²² Here we can pose several queries about the new meanings of the incarnation mystery: "The incarnation mystery is impenetrable and we cannot use up all its meanings. In every age in our history, God calls on us to discover new meanings and

²¹ Second Pastoral Message, *Christian Presence in the East: Witness and Message*, Easter 1992, number 26.

²² *Ibid.* number 27. See also The Sixth Pastoral Message, *Together toward Future*, Christmas 1999, numbers 6-7.

new extensions for a new-old mystery in light of our current history in the Middle East. What are the meanings of the incarnation mystery that God calls on us to think deeply about at this current period of our history and in response to the demands and challenges and calls of the present time? How can we be incarnate and in what spheres?"²³

The First Pastoral Letter explains the incarnation of our churches in the East in the Arabic language and culture in the past, present and future from the perspective of authenticity and openness.²⁴

From Incarnation Dialogue to Church Dialogue

In the Second Pastoral Letter, the Churches in the East examine the meaning of dialogue. They derive the principles for dialogue from the incarnation mystery,

"The East is the land of dialogue between man and God throughout the history of salvation. Such dialogue culminated in Jesus Christ whose nature combines the human and the divine at the same time... God talked with man in Jesus Christ so that people can open channels for dialogue with each other."²⁵

From this theological incarnation, the letter addresses all sorts of dialogue: dialogue among Christians, dialogue with our Muslim brothers and sisters, and dialogue with all those of goodwill.²⁶

Jesus Christ is our Way to our Societies and our Societies are the Way to Him

Jesus Christ does not constitute an isolating body between us and our societies and likewise our societies do not constitute a barrier between us and Christ. The society in question here is a concrete one, with its physi-

²³ *Together toward Future*, number 7.

²⁴ *Christian Presence in the East*, numbers 28-33. See also father Rafiq Khoury, *The Incarnation of Eastern Churches in the Arab Tent: A Palestinian Perspective*, Al-Liqa' Publications 1998, p. 393.

²⁵ See *Christian Presence in the East*, number 45.

²⁶ It is known that the Catholic Patriarchs of the East have dedicated a special letter to Christian-Moslem dialogue, the Third Pastoral Letter, *Together before God for Man and Society: Coexistence between Christians and Moslems in the Arab World*, Christmas 1994.

ogonomy and distinguishing features. This society is the Arab society in which and for which we live. It is our way to Christ and Christ is our way to it.²⁷ This conforms with what the Second Letter of the Eastern Catholic Patriarchs says, stressing that Jesus is our way toward man and man in his turn is the road of the Church and the road that “always passes by the mysteries of incarnation and salvation.”²⁸

“This vision could deeply change our view of ourselves, our Christ and our existence as Christians and as a Christian community; we could change from a self-centered Christian community (and thus subject to spiritual sterility) to a community dedicated to the service of others.”²⁹

Following the Example of Jesus in Serving Society

Jesus presents Himself thus, “I came not to be served, but to serve” (Mk 10:45). His service radiated in his dealing with the marginalized and out-cast.³⁰ Jesus gave a prime example of service when He washed the feet of His disciples and asked them to do as He did (see Jn 13:1-15). Like Jesus the servant, the Church is a serving Church that puts herself at the service of man in all spheres.

“She is the good Samaritan that does not cease to heal the wounds of her people ... God supported man in everything except sin ... and the Church remains a live, visible and tangible sign that witnesses in history for this divine support by standing close to people, alleviating their pain and reinforcing their growth.”³¹

For the Sake of the Human Being

Man is a priority for God, which is based in Christianity on the incarnate Christ who has shown solidarity with every human being.³² Based on this

²⁷ See Father Rafiq Khoury, “A Question that Challenges US and an Answer that Awaits Us,” in *Openings of the Time to Come*, Al-Liqa' publications 1996, pp. 134-135.

²⁸ *Christian Presence in the Holy Land*, number 52.

²⁹ See Father Rafiq Khoury, “A Question that Challenges Us...,” p. 134.

³⁰ See *Christian Presence in the East*, number 34.

³¹ *Ibid*, number 36.

³² *Ibid*, number 52.

principle, the Second Pastoral Letter identifies this human being for the Eastern Churches: It is the Arab human being whom the Churches describe as a suffering human being.³³ It is this human being the Eastern Churches support, "This is the individual whom we declare our solidarity with because he is part of our humanity, cultural depth, and the environment of our vocation and mission."³⁴ Such solidarity shuns all personal interests; it is solidarity for the sake of

"defending human rights and the liberation of nations and their right to a dignified and free life. It is solidarity to help nations in their development projects and work to preserve human dignity in face of all the internal and external forces that oppress them and prevent them from achieving their legitimate aspirations and ambitions."³⁵

"The liberation of man and his development in a dignified manner that meets God's gift to him, as well as the resistance of oppression no matter where it originates from or who perpetrates it, are all part of the mystery of Christ and the Church."³⁶

CONCLUSION

Jesus Christ represents a sublime spiritual heritage in human history. He is part of the religious and spiritual heritages at all times and in all places. He is the religious reserve and spiritual store for today's humanity which finds itself at a crossroad or in the midst of a dark tunnel. The various spiritual heritages are not contradictory but complementary. We hope that these spiritual energies would combine to serve humanity today. It is time that religions and spiritual heritages play their role in guiding the rudder of human life and history. Religion has many times been a source of human struggle and wars. It is time that religions and spiritual heritages adopt a new perspective to help mankind overcome difficulties, serve people and glorify the name of God.

³³ *Ibid.*, number 53.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, number 54.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, number 55.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, number 55.

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Father Rafiq Kfoury

Jesus Christ: A Prophet of Islam

Dr. Mustafa Abu Sway

Associate Professor of Philosophy and Islamic Studies,
Al-Quds University, Jerusalem

INTRODUCTION

Islam, as the religion that was revealed to Prophet Muhammad (Peace be upon him), is younger than Judaism and Christianity. It perceives itself as the completion of the line of prophecy both in message and person; humanity was ready for the final revelation and final prophet. Islam is inclusive and, therefore, the prophets of the Children of Israel are recognized. The essential monotheistic messages that were revealed before are also included in what a Muslim believes:

Say: "We believe in Allah and what has been revealed to us, and what was revealed to Abraham and Ishmael and Isaac and Jacob and the tribes, and what was given to Moses and Jesus and the prophets from their Lord; we do not make any distinction between any of them and to Him do we submit."
*Qur'an, 3:84*¹

It is no wonder that Paul Schwarzenau, in *Korankunde für Christen*, referred to the Qur'an as an ecumenical revelation.² Compatible with Schwarzenau's idea is the Islamic paradigm for *convivencia* amongst the children of Abraham and beyond. This could be done while consciously celebrating the right to be different. This paradigm could not be found

¹ Cf. "The Messenger believes in what has been revealed to him from his Lord, as do men of faith. Each one [of them] believes in Allah, His angels, His books, and His Messengers. [The believers say]: "We make no distinction between one and another of His Messengers..." Qur'an, 2:285

² Murad Hofmann, *Islam: The Alternative* (Reading: Garnet Publishing, 1993) p. 21.

elsewhere; it would be anachronistic to claim so. It is for this reason that I advocate an Islamic theology of soft-otherness, for the Jew or the Christian is not totally other for the Muslim.

Nevertheless, the Islamic worldview presents theological and historical narratives that are different from the position that evolved and became dominant in Christianity, and from the essential Jewish position regarding Jesus Christ (Peace be upon him). While the paper is critical of their theological positions, this does not reflect in any way a less than perfect love on the part of the author towards Jesus Christ himself. This is a matter of faith.

A FAMILY PROFILE: AL `IMRAN, MARY AND JESUS

From the beginning of life on earth, divine guidance was bestowed on humanity through the agency of the prophets. The monotheistic message formed the core of revelation; whenever it suffered from change (ex: human editing) it was reconfirmed through a new prophet and revelation. This process continued until humanity was ready for a final universal revelation in the form of the Qur'an. From an Islamic perspective, all the prophets, from Adam to Muhammad (Peace be upon them), are prophets of Islam. Jesus Christ was one of them and came before Prophet Muhammad, the Seal of the Prophets.³ Jesus Christ's story in the Qur'an begins with the positioning of his maternal lineage⁴, the family of *`Imran*, within the family of prophets:

Allah did choose Adam and Noah, the family of Abraham, and the family of *`Imran* above all people... Offspring, one of the other; and Allah hears and knows all things. *Qur'an*, 3: 33-34

³ "Muhammad is not the father of any of your men, but [he is] the Messenger of Allah, and the *Seal of the Prophets*: And Allah has full knowledge of all things." *Qur'an*, 33:40

⁴ Needless to say that, from an Islamic perspective, Jesus Christ had absolutely no paternal lineage as well be discussed later on. Even the metaphorical use of "Father" is ruled out in Islamic theological discourse in favor of a pure monotheistic belief system (i.e. Tawhid). This Qur'anic position should be contrasted with two conflicting accounts of Jesus Christ's genealogy in the Gospel of Mathew (1:1-16) and the Gospel of Luke (3: 23-38). These two accounts have different names and different number of generations.

It is as if there was a fourth spiritual stage for humanity. There is a sense of spiritual elation that paves the way for the emergence of Jesus Christ. This impeccable family background begins with his maternal grandmother dedicating her daughter Mary (Peace be upon her), while still in her womb thinking that she was a male, to the service of Allah:

Behold! A woman of *Imran* said: "O my Lord! I do dedicate unto Thee what is in my womb for Thy special service: so accept this of me: for Thou hearest and knowest all things."
When she was delivered, she said: "O my Lord! Behold! I am delivered of a female child!"...*Qur'an, 3:36*

Her mother named her Mary (*Mariam*) and asked Allah SWT to protect her and her offspring from Satan. Allah SWT accepted her in a unique way:

Right graciously did her Lord accept her; He made her grow in purity and beauty... *Qur'an, 3:37*

PROPHET ZACHARIAH TAKES CARE OF MARY:

Mary became an orphan as a child and many people competed to take care of her. It reached the stage that they had to cast their lots:

...You were not with them when they cast lots with their "pens", as to which of them should be charged with the care of Mary; nor were you with them when they disputed [this issue]. *Qur'an, 3: 44*

"To the care of Zachariah was she assigned" but the surprise was that whenever he went to check on her, to take care of her and to bring her provisions, as her guardian, he was surprised to find out that divine intervention took care of her miraculously:

...Every time that he entered the niche [where she worships] to see her, he found her supplied with sustenance. He said: "O Mary! Whence [comes] this to you?" She said: "From Allah: for Allah provides sustenance to whom He pleases, without measure." *Qur'an, 3:37*

Mary's answer made Zachariah conscientious of Allah's Omnipotence. He seized that moment, which was full with spirituality, to make a supplication to Allah SWT. Zakariya's wife was barren and he prayed for offspring! The answer came very quickly with good tidings:

"O Zachariah! We give you good news of a son: his name shall be Yahya: on none by that name have We conferred distinction before." *Qur'an, 19: 7*

Yahya, or John the Baptist as known in English, was a prophet, like his father:

"O Yahya! Take hold of the Book with might": And We gave him Wisdom even as a youth. *Qur'an, 19: 12*

Prophet Muhammad referred to Jesus and Yahya, in the story of the Ascension (*Al-Mi'raj*), as the "maternal cousins" (*Ibna Al-Khalah*).⁵ The Qur'an did not say much about Yahya's life. He was described as being "noble, chaste, and a prophet".⁶ His vocation as a prophet must have rendered support to Jesus Christ.

MARY AND JESUS: NO DIVINIZATION:

It is no wonder that the Qur'an declares that Mary was chosen over all women of earth. Through divine acceptance, she reached a very high spiritual rank, for she was prepared for a great role that surpasses human imagination:

Behold! The angels said: "O Mary! Allah hath chosen thee and purified thee - chosen thee above the women of all nations. O Mary! Worship thy Lord devoutly: prostrate thyself, and bow down [in prayer] with those who bow down." *Qur'an, 3:42-43*

No other woman was mentioned in the Qur'an by name except Mary and no woman was praised and distinguished like her. According to Ibn Hazm, Mary was a prophetess, because she received revelation. This posi-

⁵ Literally, they are the two sons of the maternal aunts. Bukhari, *Sahih*, Hadith # 3598.

⁶ Qur'an, 3:39

tion, albeit being in the minority amongst Muslim scholars, reflects the very high status that Mary was accorded. Nevertheless, like all other human beings, she was ordered to worship her Lord, Allah SWT, for how could one think otherwise? The Qur'an inculcates a deep respect for Mary and her son, but never places them above humanity. To the contrary, the Qur'an stresses their very humanity:

Christ, the son of Mary, was no more than a Messenger; many were the Messengers that passed away before him. His mother was a woman of truth. They had to eat food [to subsist]. See how Allah does make His Signs clear to them; yet see in what ways they are deluded away from the truth!
Qur'an, 5: 75

This verse is part of an anti-Trinity Qur'anic critique:

They do blaspheme who say: Allah is one of three in a Trinity: for there is no god except One God. If they desist not from their word [of blasphemy], verily a grievous punishment will befall the blasphemers among them. *Qur'an, 5: 73*

Because of the *de facto* divinization of Mary and the formal divinization of Jesus Christ, Allah SWT asks Jesus a rhetorical question:

And behold! Allah will say: "O Jesus the son of Mary! Did you say unto people, 'Worship me and my mother as gods in derogation of Allah?'" He will say: "Glory to You! Never could I say what I had no right [to say]. Had I said such a thing, You would indeed have known it. You know what is in my heart, though I know not what is in Yours. For You know in full all that is hidden. Never said I to them aught except what You did command me to say, to wit, 'Worship Allah, my Lord and your Lord'..."
Qur'an, 5: 116-117

The words of Jesus are those of a mortal with limited knowledge and a real servant who recognizes the Omniscient Lord. He submitted to Allah SWT and conveyed the message to his people. There are additional Qur'anic verses that reject all polytheistic theologies. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to enumerate all of them, a few representative verses will further highlight the Tawhidic narrative. The first example is a

very short chapter dedicated to the confirmation of the oneness of Allah SWT and the rejection of any organic relationship with His creation:

Say: "Allah is Unique [in His Oneness]! Allah, the Source [of everything]. He has not fathered anyone nor was He fathered, and there is nothing comparable to Him!" *Qur'an, Chapter 112.*

This is probably the second most recited chapter in the Qur'an after the Opening chapter (i.e. *Al-Fatiha*), the recitation of which is imperative during the five daily prayers. Also, chapter 112 is featured in *Dhikr*.⁷ This is translated in the life of the religious Muslim into hundreds, if not thousands, of recitations every year of verses the content of which has anti-Trinitarian content. This is deeply inculcated in the psyche of the Muslims. While the language of this chapter is general, I have never failed to remember, as a background, the Christian narrative about the Sonship of Jesus.

The end of the chapter of Mary includes a very critical account of the idea of Sonship which is addressed in general language. Nevertheless, it is understood in this context to be a reference to the claim that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. The Qur'anic narrative reflects how grave this claim is:

They say: "[Allah] Most Gracious has begotten a son!"
Indeed you have put forth a thing most monstrous!
As if the skies are ready to burst, the earth to split asunder,
and the mountains to fall down in utter ruin.
That they should invoke a son for [Allah] Most Gracious.
For it is not consonant with the majesty of [Allah] Most Gracious that He should beget a son.
Not one of the beings in the heavens and the earth but must come to [Allah] Most Gracious as a servant. *Qur'an, 19: 88-93*

Furthermore, Jesus Christ's humanity is emphasized every time he is called the "son of Mary"⁸, or when he is described as a "servant"⁹ who is

⁷ It is the recollection of the name of Allah. It could use supplications taught by Prophet Muhammad or simply reciting the Qur'an.

⁸ Qur'an, 43:57

⁹ Qur'an, 43: 59

a recipient of Allah's favors and as a prophet whose vocation is to call the people to worship the only Lord that exists:

... fear Allah and obey me. For Allah, He is my Lord and your Lord: so worship ye Him: this is a straight way.
Qur'an, 43: 63-64

The miraculous and fatherless birth of Jesus Christ is not a valid reason to raise him to a status above that of a normal human being. The Qur'an uses the story of Adam, who was created without a father or a mother, to illustrate the humanity of Jesus Christ. Being created without a father reflects the Omnipotence of Allah, rather than the divinity of the created:

The similitude of Jesus before Allah is as that of Adam; He created him from dust, and then said to him: "Be": and he was. *Qur'an, 3: 59*

In essence, all creation came into existence through "Be":

Verily, when He wills a thing, His Command is, "Be", and it is! *Qur'an, 36: 82*

Allah SWT is absolutely distinguished from His creation. There are no grey areas; all that which is limited to space-time relationships, all that which is historical, all that which exists here and now is different from Him:

...there is nothing whatever like unto Him... *Qur'an, 42:11*

Every being, no matter how high this being ranks in the order of the created, remains in a state of *otherness* in relationship to Allah SWT. Yes, Jesus Christ came into existence miraculously, and he ranks high among the prophets and messengers, yet he remains a human being in every respect. The nature of Jesus Christ is summarized in the following verses that form a reminder to the Christians, and everyone else:

O People of the Book! Commit no excess in your religion: nor say of Allah aught but the truth. Christ Jesus the son of Mary was [no more than] a Messenger of Allah, and His Word, which He bestowed on Mary, and a Spirit proceeding from Him: so believe in Allah and His Messengers. Say not "Trinity": desist: it will be better for you: for Allah is One

God: Glory be to Him: [Far exalted is He] above having a son. To Him belong all things in the heavens and on earth. And enough is Allah as a Disposer of affairs. Christ does not disdain to serve and worship Allah...
Qur'an, 4: 171-172

There are numerous other verses that condemn those who say, because of the Trinity, that Jesus is God:

They do blaspheme who say: "Allah is Christ the son of Mary." But said Christ: "O Children of Israel! Worship Allah, my Lord and your Lord." Whoever joins other gods with Allah - Allah will forbid him the Garden, and the Fire will be for the wrongdoers. There will be no one to help. They do blaspheme who say Allah is one of three in a Trinity for there is no god except One God... *Qur'an, 5: 72-73*

The last verse rejects the Trinity construct and considers it blasphemous. All three "persons" of the Trinity do exist in the Qur'an independently. Allah SWT is different from both, the Spirit of the Holy¹⁰ (i.e. the Archangel Gabriel) and Jesus Christ. Allah SWT is the Creator, and the other two were creatures, accidentals, who are dependent in their existence on Allah SWT. It is He who strengthened and supported Jesus Christ through the Spirit of the Holy:

Those Messengers We endowed with gifts, some above others: To one of them Allah spoke; others He raised to degrees [of honor]; to Jesus the son of Mary, We gave clear [Signs], and strengthened him with the Spirit of the Holy. *Qur'an, 2: 253*

The language of the verse leaves no room for speculation about the inequality of the three; Jesus Christ *needed* help, the Spirit of the Holy was *used* to render support to Jesus, and all took place at the Will of Allah SWT.

Today, there is a prominent Christian theological trend represented by Hans Küng. He realized "how great the distance is between the original statements about Father, Son and Spirit and the later dogmatic Church

¹⁰ *Ruh Al-Qudus*. 'The Holy Spirit' is not an accurate translation.

teachings on Trinity". To solve the problem, he came up with a new definition of the Trinity where it becomes "God's revelation in Jesus Christ through the Spirit", and where Jesus being "chosen and authorized by God." Murad Hofmann commented on Küng's theology, he said:

If the real intention of this Christology is to say that Jesus is neither begotten by God nor that he is consubstantial with him, and that God's spirit does not represent a divine person, then it is Muslim and confirms the statement that 'Muslims are the better Christians'- and, incidentally, the older Christians. Only in the Qur'an has the Christology of the Jewish Christians, as rediscovered by Küng remained pure.¹¹

THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION:

In a chapter of the Qur'an that was named after her (i.e. Maryam), Mary is portrayed as a very pious woman who dedicated her time to worship Allah SWT. Indeed, she chose to do so in seclusion, and it is there that the Angel revealed to her the news about the Immaculate Conception:

Relate in the Book [the story of] Mary, when she withdrew from her family to a place in the East.
She placed a screen [to screen herself] from them; then We sent to her Our angel, and he appeared to her as a man in all respects. *Qur'an, 19: 16-17*

The sudden appearance of that "man", the angel, before her was not welcomed! Any woman in her status would have rejected his presence. As a pious woman, she sought refuge in Allah SWT, for she expected evil:

She said: "I seek refuge in from thee to [Allah] Most Gracious: [come not near] if you do fear Allah." *Qur'an, 19: 18*

The mission and nature of this "man" was revealed to her; it was time to tell her about her own mission in carrying the Word of Allah, a Sign and challenge for humanity:

¹¹ Hofmann, pp. 25-26

He said: "Nay, I am only a messenger from thy Lord, to announce to thee the gift of a [spiritually] purified son."

Qur'an, 19: 19

First, Mary had to go through the sudden presence of the angel in her isolated spot where she worships Allah SWT, and now the news of conceiving a son! The news must have had a tremendous psychological impact on her. One can easily detect the initial rejection:

She said: "How shall I have a son, seeing that no man has touched me, and I am not unchaste?" *Qur'an, 19: 20*

Yet, the angel made clear that it was divine decree and the only way forward was submission to His will:

He said: "So [it will be] thy Lord saith, 'That is easy for Me: and [We wish] to appoint him as a Sign unto people and a Mercy from Us': it is a matter [so] decreed." *Qur'an, 19: 21*

The essence of this message was repeated in the chapter of *Al 'Imran*, where the angels give glad tidings of a "Word" from Allah, and that his name will be "Christ Jesus son of Mary". He will be held in honor in both worlds and that he will speak to people in the cradle and as a mature person. In addition, Allah SWT will teach him the "Book and Wisdom, the Torah and the Gospel."¹² Within the same context, Mary confirms her piety as a state that contradicts the notion of carrying a son without knowing a man. The answer stressed Allah's Omnipotence which created the laws of nature but is not bound by them:

"...Allah creates what He wills: when He has decreed a Plan, He but says to it, 'Be,' and it is!" *Qur'an, 3: 47*

Mary conceived him and she went to a remote place where she went through labor. Here she wished the whole story did not happen, for it is one thing to be pregnant and it is another to carry the child home. This happening to a well-known pious single woman was too much to handle; she wished she was dead:

So she conceived him, and she retired with him to *a remote place*.

¹² Qur'an, 3: 47-48

And childbirth drove her to the trunk of a palm tree: she said
[in her anguish]: "Ah! Would that I had died before this!
Would that I had been a thing forgotten and out of sight!"
Qur'an, 19: 22-23

Yet there was a voice that tried to console her during these difficult times:

But he cried to her *from beneath her*: "Grieve not! For thy
Lord had provided a rivulet beneath thee;
And shake towards yourself the trunk of the palm tree; it
will let fall fresh ripe dates upon you.
So eat and drink and cool your eye. And if you do see any
human being, say: 'I have vowed a fast to [Allah] Most Gra-
cious, and this day will I enter into no talk with any human
being.'" *Qur'an, 19: 24-26*

Whose voice was it? Muslim scholars differed on source of the voice. Ibn Kathir (d.774 AH) stated that Ibn Abbas [companion and cousin of Prophet Muhammad] said the voice came from [the archangel] Gabriel, because Jesus did not speak until Mary reached her family. Also, this position was adopted by Sa'eed Ibn Jubair, Al-Dahhak, `Amr Ibn Maimun, Al-Sadi and Qatadah that it was the angel Gabriel, peace be upon him, meaning that he called her from the bottom of the valley. The other position is reflected by Mujahid who said that it was Jesus son of Mary who spoke to her.¹³

If it were the angel who spoke to Mary, the narrative would form simply a continuation of the message of support. This, however, poses a different problem; it means that the angel stayed there throughout the pregnancy, for there are no indications of any interruptions of his stay. Some Muslim scholars spoke of a miraculous short term pregnancy, yet there is nothing to substantiate this from the Qur'an. In addition, the Qur'an already stated that after the conception she retired to a "remote place" (19:22). This remoteness is relative to the place where the conception took place; it could be interpreted also as an end to the particular mission of the angel, leaving Mary alone.

At any rate, those who said it was the voice of the angel positioned him at the bottom of the valley. This understanding presupposes the inappro-

¹³ Ibn Kathir, *Tafsir* (Beirut: Dar Al-Jil, 1988) vol. 3, p. 115

prate presence of the angel, since he had the form of a man, in the immediate place where she delivered her son, and that this place is high; no name of the place was given:

And We made the son of Mary and his mother as a sign: We gave them both shelter on high ground, affording rest and security and furnished with springs. *Qur'an, 23: 50*

Note in the above verse that Allah SWT is rendering support to Mary and her son, and that the agency of the angel is absent. This understanding provides support to the second position. If it were the voice of baby Jesus, it would simply be the beginning of his support to his mother; this would have given her courage to take him to her family. Once her family exclaimed about the baby, he came to her rescue, for if she were left on her own, no one would believe her:

"At length she brought the [babe] to her people, carrying him [in her arms]. They said: "O Mary! Truly an amazing thing you have brought!
O sister of Aaron!¹⁴ Your father was not a man of evil, nor your mother a woman unchaste!"
But she pointed to him. 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 [revealed] to me the Book and made me a prophet;
And he made me blessed wheresoever I be, and enjoined on me Prayer and Charity as long as I live:
And [He] 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: 27-32*

¹⁴ Muhammad Asad, in the *Message of the Qur'an*, had the following footnote to explain why Mary was called "Sister of Aaron": "In ancient Semitic usage, a person's name was often linked with that of a renowned ancestor or founder of the tribal line. Thus, for instance, a man of the tribe of Banu Tamim was sometimes addressed as "son of Tamim" or "brother of Tamim". Since Mary belonged to the priestly caste, and hence descended from Aaron, the brother of Moses, she was called a "sister of Aaron" (in the same way as her cousin Elisabeth, the wife of Zachariah, is spoken of in Luke I, 5, as one "of the daughters of Aaron". Muhammad Asad, Translator; *The Message of the Qur'an* (Dar Al-Andalus: Gibraltar, 1980) p. 460

A tradition of Prophet Muhammad adds another attribute of Jesus Christ that attests to his special status:

Abu Hurayrah (May Allah be pleased with him) narrated that the Messenger of Allah (Peace be upon him) said:

"There is no newly born except that [at the moment of birth] Satan disturbs him, so he begins to cry from Satan's disturbance with the exception of the son of Mary and his mother."

Then Abu Hurayrah added: Recite if you will [the supplication of Mary's mother in the Qur'an, 3 :37]:

"...And I commend her and her offspring to Thy protection from Satan, the Accursed one."¹⁵

The overall picture was summed up in the chapter *Al-Tahrim* in a context that considered her as a spiritual role model. Each of two women – the wife of the Pharaoh and Mary – was presented "as an example for those who believe":

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*

One can reflect on the beauty of the some fourteen hundred years of Islamic literature that reflect the message of the Qur'an and the Sunnah vis-à-vis Mary. Muslim scholars throughout the ages held Mary in high esteem and never doubted her chastity. The Islamic position reflects the truth about her; she was a very pious woman whom Allah SWT accepted. She was chaste and carried Jesus miraculously without a father. There are two non-Muslim extreme positions regarding Mary. The first group considered her the God-bearing (*theotokos*) Mary, the "Mother of God" and began praying to her. (One wonders: to whom did Mary pray after delivering Jesus?) The second group went to extremes in the opposite di-

¹⁵ Al-Mundhiri, *Mukhtasar Sahih Muslim* (Amman: Al-Maktabah Al-Islamiyyah, 1412 AH) # 1619 (*Sahih Muslim* vol. 7,#96-The Istanbul Edition)

rection where Mary is accused of being unchaste and that Jesus Christ is the fruit of adultery. According to The Jewish Encyclopedia¹⁶, the word *mamzer* (Hebrew for "bastard") was applied to Jesus. This latter group, according to the Qur'an, is from amongst the "People of the Book" who "worshipped the calf" (Qur'an, 4:153), were commanded to "transgress not in the matter of the Sabbath"(Qur'an, 4:154), "broke their Covenant...slew the Messengers in defiance of right" (Qur'an, 4: 155) and:

That they rejected Faith; that they uttered against Mary a grave false charge. *Qur'an, 4: 156*

After the encounter between Mary and her family, and the miraculous speech of baby Jesus Christ in defense of his mother, the Qur'an does not provide other details about his childhood. He reemerged in the Qur'anic narrative as an adult prophet preaching the word of Allah SWT and performing miracles in support of his vocation as a Messenger.

THE GOSPEL (AL-INJIL):

Allah SWT, out of His Mercy, never left humanity without guidance. This is why He sent one messenger after another, and sometimes there was more than one messenger or prophet. There are four revealed books that were mentioned by name in the Qur'an; other than the latter they include the Torah of Moses, the *Zabur* of David and the *Injil* of Jesus. After mentioning Noah, Abraham and that there were prophets amongst their offspring, there appears Jesus Christ as a continuum of the line of prophecy:

Then, in their wake, We followed them up with [others of] Our messengers: We sent after them Jesus the son of Mary, and bestowed on him the Gospel... *Qur'an, 57:27*

The relationship between the Gospel (*Injil*, which is always mentioned in the singular in the Qur'an)¹⁷ that Jesus received and the Torah can be illustrated through the following verse which appears in a context that

¹⁶ "Jesus." *Jewish Encyclopedia*. 24 July 2004 -<http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/1009>

¹⁷ The Qur'an recognizes the revelation of one Gospel that does not exist anymore in its original form. This is why there is no recognition of the Canonical Gospels or those described as Apocryphal.

mentions some of the laws of the Torah, Jews' relationship to it and that it is imperative to judge according to revelation:

And in their footsteps We sent Jesus the son of Mary, confirming the Law that had come before him: We sent him the Gospel: therein was guidance and light, and confirmation of the Law that had come before him: a guidance and an admonition to those who fear Allah. Let the People of the Gospel judge by what Allah had revealed therein... *Qur'an*, 5: 46-47

As a messenger to the Children of Israel, Jesus Christ stated that, in addition to the Signs that he brought to them from their Lord, he came to them in order to confirm the Torah which was before him. Yet, vis-à-vis the Law, he addressed them by saying:

And to make lawful to you part of what was [before] forbidden to you... *Qur'an*, 3:50

The confirmation of the previous message means a confirmation of the theology of *Tawhid*. It is simply attesting to the oneness of Allah, a message that was brought by every prophet:

For We assuredly sent amongst every people a messenger, [with the command], "Serve Allah and eschew Evil..."
Qur'an, 16:36

Some of the content of the Gospel, other than the confirmation of *Tawhid* and the relationship to the Torah and the Mosaic Law, was revealed in the Qur'an. One of the most remarkable messages was a prophecy about the coming of Prophet Muhammad:

Those who follow the Messenger, the *unlettered (Ummyy)* Prophet, whom they find mentioned in their own [Scriptures], in the Torah and the Gospel... *Qur'an*, 7:157

The same message was confirmed in another Qur'anic narrative:

And remember, Jesus, the son of Mary, said: "O Children of Israel! I am the messenger of Allah [sent] to you, confirming the Torah [which came] before me, and giving Glad

Tidings of a Messenger to come after me, whose name shall be Ahmad..." *Qur'an, 61:6*

This particular verse inspired many Muslim scholars to explore the Gospels and the Torah. Numerous books were written throughout Islamic history on this subject. As an example, they saw verses such as *Deuteronomy 18:18*¹⁸ as a reference to Prophet Muhammad rather than Jesus.

There is a very important correlation between "from their brethren" (Deut. 18:18) and the "unlettered" adjective in Qur'an, 7:157. To begin with the latter, "unlettered" is a very popular translation, which is indeed an interpretation, of 'Ummiyy', the original word in Arabic. Once it is mentioned, 'Ummiyy' denotes illiteracy. Prophet Muhammad was indeed unlettered but there is another meaning that was ignored:

Among the People of the Book are some who, if entrusted with a hoard of gold, will [readily] pay it back; others amongst them, who if entrusted with a single silver coin, will not repay it unless you constantly stood demanding, because they say, "there is no call on us [to keep faith] with these Gentiles" (*Ummiyyin*; pl. of *Ummiyy*)... *Qur'an, 3:75*

The Arabs were mostly illiterate at the time the Qur'an was revealed, but it cannot be a reference to illiteracy in this verse, for it would include the illiterate Jew. A prophet was expected, but he was expected to come from the line of Isaac not Ishmael. Here I invoke the phrase "from their brethren" (Deut. 18:18). If the prophecy were about someone from their brothers, he would have been from the line of Isaac, or more precisely, from the line of Jacob because Esau was also excluded from the picture through deception! "From their brethren" would be the descendants of Abraham through his son Ishmael. Essentially, the People of the Book rejected Prophet Muhammad because he was a non-Israelite Prophet.

Considering the etymology of Ahmad, there is a prophecy in Haggai, ii, 7 that corresponds to Qur'an, 61:6

¹⁸ "I will raise them up a Prophet from among their brethren, like unto thee, and I will put my words in his mouth; and he shall speak unto them all that I shall command him." *Deut.18:18*. In *What the Bible Says about Muhammad*, Ahmad Deedat lists several similarities between Prophets Moses and Muhammad in explanation of "like unto thee". These include normal natural birth and death for both, that each got married, and that both were prophets and political leaders at the same time.

"And I will shake all nations, and the *desire* of all nations will come"

The original Hebrew word for desire is *himda*. The word 'desire' is so general that it could be applied to any prophet. *Himda* on the other hand has the same three consonants identical with Ahmad (h-m-d). The name Jesus Christ, for example, does not have any shared consonant with *himda*. Abdul-Ahad Dawud, formerly David Keldani, a priest of the Uni-ate-Chaldean sect, had the following to say:

The Gospel of St. John, being written in Greek, uses the name *Paracletos*, a barbarous form unknown to classical Greek literature. But *Pericyltos*, which corresponds exactly with Ahmad in its signification of "illustrious," "glorious" and "praised," in its superlative degree, must have been the translation into Greek of *Himda* or probably *Hemida* of the Aramaic form, as uttered by Jesus Christ. Alas, there is no Gospel extant in the original language spoken by Jesus!¹⁹

THE MIRACLES:

The miracles in the Qur'an are out-of-the-ordinary events that take place at the hands of a prophet to support him in his vocation. It is Allah SWT who enables the prophet to perform the miracle by His leave or directly interferes in history and allows the miracle to take place. The miracle, or rather Sign (ayah) in the language of the Qur'an, points in the direction of Allah, the Omnipotent, and not in direction of the prophet has no control over its course. Jesus Christ was no different; he was allowed several miracles.

In addition to being a Sign himself, being the Word of God, and not God the Word, Jesus Christ had the following miracles:

Then will Allah say: "O Jesus the son of Mary! Recount my favor to you and to your mother. Behold! I strengthened thee with the spirit of the holy, so that you did speak to the people in infancy and in maturity. Behold! I taught you the Book and Wisdom, the Torah and the Gospel. And behold!

¹⁹ Abdul-Ahad Dawud, *Muhammad in the Bible*, 5th ed. (Doha: The Ministry of Awqaf and Islamic Affairs, 1994) p. 24.

You did make out of clay, the figure of a bird, by My leave, and you did breath into it, and it became a bird by My leave, and you did heal those born blind, and the lepers, by My leave. And behold! You did bring forth the dead by My leave. And behold! I did restrain the Children of Israel from [harming] you when you showed them the Clear Signs, and the unbelievers among them said: 'This is nothing but evident magic.' " *Qur'an, 5: 110*

There are other miracles that took place at the hands of Jesus Christ. He informed the Children of Israel about things that they have done or kept in the privacy of their homes:

"...And I declare to you what you eat, and what you store in your houses. Surely, therein is a Sign for you if you did believe." *Qur'an, 3:49*

One other remarkable miracle that took place upon a request from Jesus Christ's Disciples (*Al-Hawariyyun*) was the Table with food that was sent down from heavens. Jesus Christ warned them against such a demand and asked them to fear Allah. They, on the other hand, wanted this Table as an assurance that Jesus told them the truth. Jesus, then, made the following supplication:

Jesus the son of Mary Said: "O Allah our Lord! Send us from heaven a Table set [with viands], that there may be for us-for the first and the last of us- a solemn festival and a Sign from You; and provide for our sustenance, for You are the best Sustainer [of our needs]."
Allah said: "I will send it down unto you..." *Qur'an, 5:114-115*

This last verse came with a warning, for those who witness a miracle like this and eat from it are expected to be true believers through and through. No names are mentioned of those Disciples, but their emergence as a group took place in a context in which Jesus Christ sensed animosity towards his message from the Children of Israel:

When Jesus found unbelief on their part he said: "Who will be my helpers [to the work of] Allah?" The Disciples said: "We are Allah's helpers: we believe in Allah, and you bear witness that we are Muslims." *Qur'an, 3:52*

THE CRUCIFIXION!

Jesus Christ was sent to the Children of Israel. Some of them believed in his prophethood and the rest were unbelievers. At one point, they plotted against him (Qur'an, 3:54). They forgot that they were dealing with Allah SWT who saved His servant miraculously:

Behold! Allah said: "O Jesus! I will cause you to die (*mutawaffika*)²⁰ and raise you to Myself and clear you [of the falsehoods] of those who blaspheme..." *Qur'an*, 3:55

Those who plotted against Jesus Christ, the High Priest and the Sanhedrin, were convinced that their scheme was fulfilled and that Jesus was crucified. They were not aware of a divine plan that saved him:

And that 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 a surety they killed him no-
Nay, Allah raised him up unto Himself; and Allah is Exalted in Power, Wise. *Qur'an*, 4: 157

Several legends emerged in the attempt to interpret this verse. "*But so it was made to appear to them*," sparked human imagination. Muhammad Assad in his commentary on the crucifixion story said that "the Qur'an categorically denies the story of the crucifixion of Jesus. There exist, among Muslims, many fanciful legends telling us that at the last moment God substituted for Jesus a person closely resembling him (according to

²⁰ The etymology of the root w-f-y (i.e. of *mutawaffika*) invokes the notion of completion and fulfillment. It is different from the root m-w-t which is associated directly with death (cf. Qur'an, 19:33). Therefore, *mutawaffika* created uncertainty about what happened to Jesus Christ right before he was raised in order to avoid the crucifixion. There are Muslim scholars who interpreted it to indicate the death of Jesus, while others interpreted it in terms of a kind of sleep, since the Qur'an does use the same root for sleeping, for it is presented in the Qur'an as a kind of death. (cf. Qur'an, 39:42). All interpretations speak of a certain completion. Some interpretations could be classified as *Israeliyyat* (i.e. reflecting either Jewish or Christian narratives that either contradict or do not have corresponding Islamic sources in the Qur'an or the authentic compendia of Hadith). Cf. Ibn Kathir, vol. 1, p. 346

some accounts, that person was Judas) who was subsequently crucified in his place. However, none of these legends finds the slightest support in the Qur'an or authentic Traditions, and the stories produced in this connection by the classical commentators must be summarily rejected. They represent no more than confused attempts at "harmonizing" the Qur'anic statement that Jesus was *not* crucified with the graphic description, in the Gospels, of his crucifixion."²¹

Another aspect associated with the story of the crucifixion in Christianity is the idea of salvation. The Islamic worldview allows room for repentance throughout the life of the human being. Every human being is born with a clear record; there is no concept of Original Sin, and Eve is not responsible for the fall in the Qur'an.²² Every human being is responsible for her deeds and repentance is a direct relationship with Allah, the For-giver (*Al-Tawwab*). That no one is responsible for what others are committing is a recurrent theme in the Qur'an²³:

...Every soul draws the meed of its acts on none but itself:
no bearer of burdens can bear the burden of another...
Qur'an, 6:164

In addition, the Islamic worldview vis-à-vis the Original Sin construct is in line with Deut. 24:16; both of them differentiate between the responsibility of parents and children.²⁴

The fact that Jesus Christ was not crucified and that he was raised to Allah SWT does mean that he is not mortal. He was destined, like other human beings, to be born, to die and to be resurrected:

"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,*
19:33

²¹ Asad, p. 134

²² See Qur'an, 2:35-37. The Qur'an uses dual grammatical verbal forms to describe the fact that Adam and Eve were deceived by Satan without their names being mentioned. The narrative renders the identification of the first one to succumb to deception mission impossible. The fall ended almost immediately with Adam repenting and Allah SWT accepting his repentance.

²³ Cf. Qur'an, 17:15; 35:18; 39:7; 53:38.

²⁴ *Deut. 24:16*: "The fathers should not be put to death for the children, neither shall the children be put to death for the fathers: every man shall be put to death for his own sin."

THE SECOND COMING:

It might be helpful at the beginning of this section to affirm that there are no direct references in the Qur'an to the second coming of Jesus Christ. In the best scenario, we talk about the interpretation of some verses in the light of many traditions that confirm the second coming. On the other hand, there are contemporary scholars who did not venture beyond what the Qur'an says, and dismissed the traditions relevant to this issue all together. The belief in the Qur'an does not mean a belief in the interpretation of any scholar. Muslims never adopted any book of exegesis and Muslim scholars have always kept a healthy distance from such a position. In addition, Islamic scholarship is a decentralized activity, whereby anyone can say anything. On the one hand, this decentralization kept the interpretation of the Qur'an a lively and thriving academic field. On the other, it allowed a plethora of opinions that could not be substantiated through the Islamic sources.

The Hadith part is also a very sophisticated field. It is very important and the Sunnah of Prophet Muhammad is a manifestation of the Qur'an itself in the life of the Prophet. It also explains and augments the message of the Qur'an. Nevertheless, despite a very deep respect and acceptance of certain compendia of Hadith, such as *Sahih Al-Bukhari* and *Sahih Muslim*, there are challenges and there is no consensus about accepting the compendia *in toto*. Even if the Hadith is authentic, and had limited independent chains of narrators, such as one chain of narrators (i.e. *Āhād*), there are two different positions regarding the inclusion of such Hadith in Islamic faith. While there are those who would accept the *Āhād* tradition, in matters of faith, there are those who reject it; they would include it in practical matters only. The multiple chains of narrators are described as *Mutawātir*. The latter category could indicate multiple confirmation of the whole text (i.e. the wording) of the Hadith or a confirmation of its message, with the wording being different, or even including other issues or details that are not part of every Hadith. The first is described as *Mutawātir Lafẓan*, and the second as *Mutawātir Ma`nan*.

Raising Jesus Christ from amongst his people brought the first chapter of Jesus Christ's life to its completion. The Qur'an did not provide details about what is next except for couple of verses such as the following:

And [Jesus] shall be a Sign [for the coming of] the Hour [of Judgment]... *Qur'an, 43:61*

This verse could be interpreted in three ways. The first depends on transliterating the first Arabic word in the verse. The first word in Arabic is *wainnahu*; it comprises three words: *wa* is "and", *inna* is "verily" and *hu* is a suffixed pronoun. The pronoun in Arabic is the equivalent of "he" in English, and in the absence of "it", this pronoun could refer to Jesus, for the whole context is about him, or, according to Al-Hassan Al-Basri and Sa'eed Ibn Jubayr, the pronoun refers to the Qur'an itself.

The other two interpretations are concerned with Jesus Christ. One of them is the position of Ibn Ishaq, who considers the miracles themselves that Jesus performed to be the Sign for the Hour. Bringing the dead back to life is a reminder of what will be the case on the Day of Judgment.

The last position speaks directly about a second return of Jesus Christ and that this return is an indication of the end of time. This is the position of Mujahid. In addition, Ibn Kathir attributed this position, using indirect speech which weakens the report, to Abu Hurayrah, Ibn `Abbas, Abu Al-`Aliyah, Abu Malik, `Ikrimah, Al-Hassan, Qatadah and Ad-Dahhak. Some of them are scholars from amongst the companions of the prophet and the rest are second generation. Ibn Kathir, furthermore, stated that there are numerous traditions of the Prophet that speak about Jesus descending before the Day of Judgment and becoming a just leader and a fair ruler.²⁵

These traditions reflect a new role for Jesus Christ that he did not experience before; he will fulfill a role of a community leader who implements Islam:

Abu Hurayra narrated that Allah's Messenger (Peace be upon him) said: "By Him in Whose Hands my soul is, surely [Jesus,] the son of Mary will soon descend amongst you and will judge mankind justly [as a Just Ruler]; he will break the Cross and kill the pigs and there will be no *Jizya* (i.e. taxation taken from non-Muslims). Money will be in abundance so that nobody will accept it, and a single prostration to Allah [in prayer] will be better than the whole world and whatever is in it."

²⁵ Ibn Kathir, vol. 4, p. 135.

Abu Huraira added: "If you wish, you can recite [this verse of the Qur'an]:

"And there is none of the People of the Book [Jews and Christians] but must believe in him [i.e. Jesus as an Apostle of Allah and a human being] before his death. And on the Day of Judgment he will be a witness against them [if they do not believe]."²⁶ *Qur'an, 4:159*

Other traditions provide additional details. These include Jesus landing in Damascus, and that he will kill the Anti-Christ, the false Messiah (*Al-Masih Al-Dajjal*), near Lydda (Lod, in Palestine) and that Jesus will die before the actual Day of Judgment.²⁷

The prominent scholars who stated that the traditions that report Jesus Christ's second coming, reached the level of being *Mutawātir* include Mahmoud Al-Alousiyy in his *Ruh Al-Ma`ani*; he stated that these traditions could have reached (*la'allaha balaghat*) the *Mutawātir Ma`nan*. Moreover, a prominent scholar of Hadith, Ibn Kathir, said that "the traditions, that report the Messenger of Allah (peace be upon him) telling about Jesus (peace be upon him) descending before the Day of Judgment as just leader and impartial ruler, are *Mutawātir*." This was the essential position of Ibn Hajar in *Fath Al-Bari Sharh Sahih Al-Bukhari*.²⁸

The names of the scholars that confirmed the *Mutawātir* status of these traditions are too many to enumerate here. There are those who dedicated whole books to this issue with the same result. Some of the scholars and titles include Muhammad Zahid Al-Kawthari, *Nazrah `Abirah fi Maza`im man Yunkir Nuzul `Issa `Alayhi Al-Salam Qabla Al-Akhirah* (1362 AH); Abdullah Al-Ghumari, *Aqidat Ahl Al-Sunnah fi Nuzul `Issa `Alayhi Al-Salam* (1369).²⁹

The other school, that does not accept these traditions to be *Mutawātir*, and that they remain within the sphere of *Āhād*, includes some prominent

²⁶ Bukhari, *Sahih*, vol. 4, book 55, # 657.

²⁷ Cf. Muslim, 18:63; Abu Dawud, 4:117; Al-Tirmidhi, 9:92; Ibn Majah, 2:1356; Ahmad, 4:181; Al-Hakim, 4:492

²⁸ Muhammad Anwar Shah Al-Kashmiri; Abdul Fattah Abu Ghuddah, ed., *Al-Tasrih bima Tawatar fi Nuzul Al-Masih*, 5th ed. (Beirut: Dar Al-Qalam, 1992) pp. 57-61.

²⁹ cf. Al-Kashmiri, pp. 56-57.

names such as Sheikh Muhammad Abdo. He also attempted to interpret these traditions metaphorically. The descending of Jesus means that the spirit of his message that includes his teachings about mercy, love and peace will prevail.³⁰

³⁰ Muhammad Nasser Al-Din Al-Albani, *Qisat Al-Masih Al-Dajjal wa Nuzul `Issa `Alayhi Al-Salam wa Qatlihi Iyyah* (Amman: Al-Maktabah Al-Islamiyyah, 1421 AH) p. 9

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(see also references listed by Father Rafiq Khoury, p. 22-23)

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