

CHAPTER 18

Jesus

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Introduction

The Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem displays Arabic inscriptions of what one scholar called the earliest Qur'ānic anti-Christian quotations (Lazarus-Yafeh 1996: 69). The Dome was built in 72/691. In the 240-meter line of Kufic Arabic script along the top of the ambulatories in the interior of the Dome, some 175 out of a total of 370 Arabic words are about the identity of Jesus, here named 'Īsā. The inscriptions indicate the divine Sonship of Jesus and the doctrine of the Trinity as matters of contention (translated in Calder, Mojaddedi, and Rippin 2013: 134–7).

The Dome inscriptions have been described by another scholar as “the first Islamic religious writings that have been dated thus far and attested to by external documents” (de Prémare 2007: 179). This includes, according to the scholar, extant manuscripts of the Qur'ān. If so, it is remarkable that this early, well-known, explicit public expression of a new faith should concern itself with Jesus to the extent it does.

The tone and content of the material about Jesus in the Dome's inscriptions do not match the bulk of the material about Jesus in what came to be the *textus receptus* of the Qur'ān. The Dome's inscriptions are strikingly confrontative, while most of the Qur'ānic material about Jesus is affirmative. However, where the Qur'ānic material is confrontative, especially related to the deity of Jesus, discussion of perceived confessions and polemical denials is much more extensive in the surrounding context.

This short essay will review and discuss the Qur'ānic material on Jesus and describe some of the Muslim understandings of the Jesus verses in the Islamic interpretive

tradition. Those understandings will then be brought up to the present in the areas of modern commentary, interfaith dialogue, and polemic.

Description of the Qurʾānic Material

The first thing the reader of the Qurʾān notices in reading the Arabic text of the Qurʾānic material about Jesus is that he is not called *Yasūʿ*, as one might expect from the Semitic milieu, but rather *ʿĪsā*. In terms of the Arabic root letters, the *ʿayn* and *yā* seem to have switched positions. The name *ʿĪsā* occurs twenty-five times, sixteen of those occurrences together with other names or titles. The main passages with Jesus material are Q 3:33–60, 5:109–20, and 19:1–36, with important isolated verses in the fourth and fifth *sūras*.

Birth accounts

The total material about Jesus in the Qurʾān is not particularly abundant, in contrast to the proportion of material about Jesus in the Dome’s inscriptions. Out of some ninety verses related to Jesus in the Qurʾān, sixty-four belong to the stories of his birth in *sūras* 3 and 19. The remaining twenty-six verses also contain significant repetition, further reducing the basic material on aspects of Jesus’ adult life and ministry. This compares to some 500 verses related to the figure of Moses in the Qurʾān and more than 240 about Abraham.

The birth stories themselves provide many details about Zakariyyā, Yaḥyā, Maryam, and the “wife of ʿImrān,” but relatively few about the infant *ʿĪsā*. The narratives given in Q 3:35–47 and 19:2–33 resemble some of the content and tone of Luke 1 and Matthew 1, as well as some Christian apocryphal stories. Angels bring Maryam news of a “word” (*kalima*) from God “whose name is the Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary” (Q 3:45). When Maryam asks how this is possible, the answer is, “God creates what he wants. When he decrees a thing, he only says ‘Be,’ and it is” (Q 3:47). Elsewhere the details are more personal: “We sent unto her our spirit that presented himself to her a man without fault” (Q 19:17). “We breathed into her of our spirit and appointed her and her son to be a sign unto all beings” (Q 21:91; cf. 66:12).

The birth stories offer a few further references to the identity of Jesus. The spirit (*rūḥ*) of God announces to Mary that her son will be a “pure (*zakī*) boy” (Q 19:18). One of these Qurʾānic stories states that Jesus will speak to humankind in the cradle (Q 3:46; cf. 5:110), and the second account offers the words of his speech: “I am the servant of God. He gave me the book and made me a prophet...” (Q 19:30). This theme of Jesus speaking as a child is also known from Christian apocryphal writings, as is the story of the birth pangs of Mary under a palm tree (Q 19:22–6).

Jesus is called the son (*ibn*) of Maryam twenty-three times in the Qurʾān. He is also called the Messiah (*al-Masīḥ*) some eleven times. The Qurʾān does not explain *al-Masīḥ* to mean “anointed” – its sense in the original Hebrew *Māshiah* and its Greek translation *Christos*. Rather, “Messiah” in the Qurʾān seems to be given as another of Jesus’ names.

Material on the adult Jesus is scattered throughout the scripture and is often enigmatic. The complexity of the Qur'ānic portrait of Jesus is best indicated in Q 4:171, a list of affirmations and denials addressed to the People of the Book but of specific interest to Christians. Affirmations in the list include the identity of Jesus son of Maryam as the Messiah, the word (*kalima*) of God "that he committed to Mary," and a spirit (*rūḥ*) from God. However, Jesus is also "only the messenger of God." Denials in the list include the divine Sonship of Jesus and, apparently, the confession that he is one of three persons in the Godhead. The concern in this verse is explicitly theological: "Do not go beyond the proper bounds in your religion and do not say about God anything except the truth." The dense – and even formulaic – nature of such Qur'ānic statements on Jesus, and their apparent polemical earnestness and urgency, encourage a close reading of the terms in which the portrait is developed.

The Qur'ān associates the Gospel (*injīl*) with ʿĪsā. According to Q 3:48, God teaches Jesus the Gospel, along with "the book and the wisdom and the Torah (*tawrā*)" (also Q 5:110). In Q 5:46 God gives Jesus the Gospel (also Q 57:27), confirming what was in the Torah. The Gospel is said to contain "guidance and light" (Q 5:46). Beyond this, however, the Qur'ān does not address the nature of the *injīl* or describe its actual message. There are also a number of references to the disciples of Jesus, using the term *ḥawāriyyūn*. The disciples appear at Q 3:52 when Jesus appeals, "Who will be my helpers unto God?" They respond positively, describing themselves as believers in God, witnesses and Muslims (Q 3:53–4; cf. 5:111). At Q 5:112–15 the disciples ask Jesus for a table spread with food from heaven as a sign that he has spoken truth to them. These Qur'ānic disciples appear to support Jesus in a battle against their enemies, and overcome them (Q 61:14).

Miracles

The Qur'ānic statement about the miracles of Jesus also appears twice. One verse provides the statement in the words of Jesus (Q 3:49), while the other gives it in the first-person speech of God (Q 5:110). In common, the verses state that Jesus creates (*khalaqa*) a bird from clay and blows life into it; heals the blind and the leper; and gives life to the dead. The version of the statement as the speech of God is peppered with the expression "by my permission" (*bi-idhnī*). In addition to these four miracles, the Qur'ān tells of a response to a request from the disciples of Jesus to send down a table from heaven spread with food (Q 5:112–15), and the ability of Jesus to announce to people what they eat and what they store in their houses (Q 3:49). These statements of miracles are not further explained in their Qur'ānic contexts, and have challenged both Muslim interpreters and academic scholars. As one scholar observed about the "table" verses, "[i]t is an absolutely opaque story" (Peters 2001: 267).

Death of Jesus

The death of Jesus is referred to in the Qur'ān in a variety of ways that have made it difficult to understand the Arabic text and to translate it into other languages. For example, George Sale translated Q 3:55, "When God said, O Jesus, verily I will cause

thee to die, and I will take thee unto me...," while Arthur Arberry later translated the same words, "When God said, 'Jesus, I will take thee to Me, and will raise thee to Me....'" The principle verse on the death of Jesus is Q 4:157, which states that the Jews did not kill Jesus, in spite of their claim to have done so. Here too, however, a crucial expression has been translated in a wide variety of ways, from Sale's "but he was represented by one in his likeness" to Arberry's "only a likeness of that was shown to them."

The Qur'ānic Jesus speaks of his own death from the cradle, "Peace on me the day I was born, and the day I die, and the day I shall be raised alive" (Q 19:33). The three verbs match those in a statement about Yaḥyā earlier in the same *sūra*: "Peace on him the day he was born, and the day he dies, and the day he shall be raised alive" (Q 19:15). Other materials include the statement in a passage that seems to argue against Jesus' deity: "The Messiah son of Maryam was no other than a messenger; messengers had passed away prior to him" (Q 5:75). At Q 5:117 in another speech of 'Īsā the same difficult expression of Q 3:55 reappears, "and when Thou didst take me to Thyself" (Arberry); which also, noted Sale, can be translated "since thou hast caused me to die."

Related to the death of Jesus, some scholars have speculated about the role of Jesus in the Qur'ān and have concluded that it is a typically *Muslim* role. The stories of many prophets seem to follow a repeated pattern. In this "prophetic pattern," God sends a messenger to a particular people with his message. The messenger delivers the message faithfully, but the people do not listen. The messenger then warns the people about the consequences of not listening, and in response the people begin to manhandle the messenger. God then intervenes, delivering his messenger from danger and destroying the people who resisted the messenger. The ambiguity of the materials related to the death of Jesus in the Qur'ān may possibly be due to the difficulty of trying to fit the story of Jesus into this pattern.

Deity of Jesus

The Qur'ān also addresses the deity of Jesus in a number of passages. Chief among these are the two verses that comment on the perceived confession, "God is the Messiah, son of Maryam" (Q 5:17 and 72). In both verses the judgment of the Qur'ān is that those who make this confession "have disbelieved (*kafara*)." The truth, according to Q 5:17, is that sovereignty of the heavens and the earth belongs to God. "Who then shall overrule God in any way if he desires to destroy the Messiah, son of Maryam, and his mother, and all those who are on earth?" asks the Qur'ān. At 5:17 it is the Qur'ānic Messiah himself who answers the confession. "O Children of Israel, worship God, my lord and your lord. To whoever associates with God, God has forbidden paradise." A detail is advanced in the context of this second passage that helps accentuate the point. The Messiah was no more than a messenger, according to Q 5:75. Both he and his mother used to eat food.

At a number of points the Qur'ān refers to a notion of trinity. The complex list of affirmations and denials at Q 4:171 contains the imperative, "Do not say 'three' (*thalātha*)." At Q 5:73, set in parallel with the perceived confession "God is the Messiah," is the confession "God is the third of three." Those who say this have disbelieved and will be punished if they do not stop, according to Q 5:73. Rather, "there is no god except one God." The Qur'ānic Jesus himself answers the perceived false confession at Q 5:116.

God asks Jesus whether he said, “Take me and my mother for two gods apart from Allāh.” Jesus’ answer is extensive: “To you be glory! It is not mine to say what I have no right to. If I indeed said it, you know it, knowing what is in my soul, and I know not what is within your soul: You know the things unseen. I only said to them what you commanded me: ‘Serve God, my lord and your lord.’” Passages in which the Qur’ānic Jesus responds to perceived confessions about him (also Q 5:72, cf. 3:51, 43:64) present not only a concept of his identity but also an assertion of how Jesus himself understood his identity in relation to God.

It is not clear whether the many Qur’ānic statements about the “son (or offspring, *walad*) of God” always refer to Jesus, but in a number of passages the connection is made explicit. Immediately after the birth narrative of Jesus in *sūra* 19, the Qur’ān states that it is not appropriate for God to take to himself a son (Q 19:35). “The Messiah, ʿĪsā son of Mary,” is also clearly indicated in Q4:171, where it is stated, “Far be it from [God] (*subḥānahu*) that he should have a son.” The connection is also explicit in Q 9:30, which states, “the Christians say the Messiah is the son (*ibn*) of God.” The Dome inscriptions include the wording of Q 19:35 and 4:171, and add 17:111: “Praise be to God, who has not taken to himself a son, and who has no partner in sovereignty, nor any protector out of humbleness.” The Dome also features the expression similar to *sūra* 112, both in the interior inscriptions and over the East and North Doors: “[God] does not beget nor was he begotten.”

Qur’ānic statements on “son of Allāh” often understand the perceived false confession to be that God “takes to himself” (*ittakhadha*) a son (Q 2:116; 10:68; 17:111; 19:35, 88, 92). The longest single passage on son of God calls this confession “a hideous thing,” such that at its utterance, “the heavens are almost torn, and the earth is split asunder and the mountains fall in ruins” (Q 19:89–90). Other verses provide possible reasons for the explosiveness of such expressions. Is it because “son of God” is taken to mean that God has had relations with a female companion (*ṣāḥiba*, Q 6:101)? Is it the understanding that “son of God” implies that God is not self-sufficient? “He has no needs. All that is in the heavens and the earth is his” (Q 10:68). Suggestions of divine Sonship, or the deity of Jesus, are often met in the Qur’ān with the affirmation of God’s sovereignty (*mulk*, Q 5:17) and the strong denial that he needs a partner (*sharīk*, Q 17:111; 5:72). “He has no protector (*walī*) out of humbleness (*dhull*)” (Q 17:111). The difficult expression for God at Q 112:2, *ṣamad*, has often been understood to mean that God is not in need of anything, while all else is in need of him. Several verses exclaim “glory to him!” (*subḥānahu*) at the confession that God would have a son (Q 2:116; 4:171; 10:68; 19:35). This seems to suggest that saying God has a son impinges on, or insults, God’s glory. The notion is made explicit at Q 19:92: “it is not appropriate (*yanbaghī*) that God should take to himself a son.”

Lacunae in the Qur’ānic Portrait

While a birth story of Jesus appears in the Qur’ān in two versions or “variant traditions,” strengthened with extra-biblical themes and details, the Qur’ān offers little from the store of other stories about Jesus known in the Middle East in the seventh century

through the Gospel accounts. There is nothing here about the teachings of Jesus. There is no narrative context provided for the miracle statements that could show the behavior of Jesus with the individuals involved. No hint is given of Jesus' polemical encounters with religious authorities, the hatred and enmity that his claims provoked, or the trial before the "chief priests and teachers of the law" that declared Jesus worthy of death.

In the narratives of Jesus' birth given in the Gospel accounts, the angel announces to Joseph, "You are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21). Such a connection between name and meaning is lost in the Qur'ān because the Arabic *ʿĪsā* communicates no sense of salvation. The background to the name Jesus (Greek *Iēsou*) assumed by the Gospel writer is the Hebrew name Joshua (*Yahôshūa'*), which means "Yahweh saves." The final root consonant of the Hebrew verb *hôshîa'* ("to save") is *ayin*. By contrast, the Qur'ānic name *ʿĪsā* makes *ʿayn* the initial consonant. The possible etymological connection to the concept of salvation is thus lost. Perhaps related to this, a number of scholars have observed in the Qur'ān's portrait of Jesus a lack of interest in the themes of sacrifice, redemption, atonement, and salvation (Lazarus-Yafeh 1981: 57; Hawting 1994: 170–1).

The extensive material in the Gospel passion accounts also seems to be negated in the Qur'ān through a few enigmatic expressions which are not further qualified in scripture. Q 4:157 states clearly that the Jews did not kill Jesus. But what is the reader to understand from *shubbiha lahum*? What actually happened? Does Q 3:55 mean to say, "I am causing you to die (*mutawaffika*)," or something different? The twenty-three other occurrences of the verb *tawaffa* in the Qur'ān have to do with death, and are generally rendered as such in translation. On what basis would that meaning not apply in Q 3:55? In any case, the Qur'ān makes no further mention of Jesus' suffering and death.

Tone and Context

The tone of the birth narratives in *sūras* 3 and 19, which take up more than two thirds of the Qur'ānic material on Jesus, is largely affirmative. The two versions appear without substantial following discussion of their implications for the identity of Jesus, beyond the brief statement at Q 19:35 that "it is not for God to take a son unto himself." The stories seem to be offered in a familiar story-book fashion to an accepting audience. By contrast, the verses that refer to other aspects of Jesus' identity give signs of emerging from a context of confrontation, and contain some strikingly emotional and even political expressions.

For example, the statement at Q 9:30 that "...the Christians say, 'the Messiah is the son of God'" contains the vigorous response, "God fights against (*qātala*) them. How they are perverted!" This is set in the midst of an important discussion of the relationship of "believers" with "those who have been given the book." The passage continues with the statement that Christians have taken the Messiah as lord (*rabb*) "...when they were commanded to worship only one god" (Q 9:31). The Qur'ān responds with a strong statement of disapproval (9:32). This is followed by the claim that God has "sent his messenger with the guidance and the religion of truth, that he may cause it to prevail

over all religion, even though the associators (*mushrikūn*) hate it" (9:33). The passage subsequently describes many of the rabbis and monks as those who "devour the wealth of humankind wantonly" (9:34), and announces their future as a painful doom (9:35). This entire passage is preceded by the famous verse of *jizya* (tribute), the command to fight (*qātala*) the People of the Book "until they pay the *jizya* out of hand and have been humbled."

The tone of this entire passage is highly polemical and suggests that the denial of Jesus' divine Sonship was an important concern for the Qur'ān, that the Qur'ān took offense at the perceived Christian confession, and that this offense connected on the one hand to punishment on the judgment day and on the other hand to political domination and religious supersession. It is interesting that similar wording to that of Q 9:33 (and also 61:9) appears above the North Door to the Dome of the Rock, introduced by the explicit claim, "Muḥammad is the servant of God and his messenger."

Another example is the discussion of Jesus' identity after the extended description of Jesus in Q 3:48–59. The passage ends with the statement, "the likeness of Jesus with God is as the likeness of Adam. He created him from dust, then said to him, 'Be!' and he is" (Q 3:59). This claim that Jesus was merely a created human is now said to be the truth about Jesus and the true narrative (*al-qaṣaṣ al-ḥaqq*) (Q 3:60, 62). If after this point there is disagreement with this recitation, according to Q 3:61, the disputant must submit to a mutual cursing ceremony in which the one who lies will be cursed. There is no ultimatum of this nature over any other theological disagreement signaled in the Qur'ān.

A third example is the explosive expression that follows the perceived confession at Q 5:17, "God is the Messiah, son of Maryam." The response to this is, "Who then shall overrule God in any way if he desires to destroy the Messiah, son of Maryam and his mother, and all those who are on earth?" The rhetoric of this response seems disproportionate to the confession and indicates a major concern of the Qur'ān. A similar expression comes at Q 19:89–91 in response to the perceived confession, "*al-Raḥmān* has taken unto himself a son" (19:88). The Qur'ān calls this a hideous (*idd*) utterance and says that because of it, "the heavens are well nigh rent...and the earth split asunder, and the mountains well nigh fall down crashing for that they have attributed to *al-Raḥmān* a son." In this response, the universe crumbles at the sound of the perceived confession.

Qur'ānic Commentary

The Islamic interpretive tradition has devoted considerable discussion to all aspects of the portrait of Jesus in the Qur'ān. In some cases commentators have added extra details to the Qur'ānic narratives, perhaps to satisfy the curiosity of readers related to what the Qur'ān leaves out. For example, at Q 3:39 al-Qurṭubī (d. 671/1272), Ibn Kathīr (d. 774/1373), and other exegetes transmitted the story that Jesus and John (*Yaḥyā*) were first maternal cousins; when John's mother visited Mary, she said, "I feel the child in my womb bowing down in reverence (*sajada*) to the child in your womb." Al-Qurṭubī

commented, "It is reported that she felt the fetus in her womb bow down with its head turned towards Mary's womb." The exegetes offered this story in an attempt to explain the Qur'ānic expression that John would "confirm a word (*kalima*) from God." Such extra material in the commentaries is often attributed to "the People of the Book" or traditional figures such as Ibn 'Abbās. Commentators did not generally consult the Bible itself for extra details about biblical figures until the Egyptian exegete al-Biqā'ī (d. 885/1480).

In other cases commentators supplied a narrative framework for disparate materials that otherwise do not give a clue as to context. They speculated about the meaning of obscure expressions in the Jesus verses, sometimes offering a wide variety of exegetical traditions. They also argued concerning possible interpretations of some expressions in the Jesus verses, attempting to bring them in line with other Qur'ānic materials or a general Islamic concept about, for example, the deity of Jesus. In still other cases the commentators ran with explicit denial materials, seeking to accentuate and consolidate Muslim beliefs. The Islamic interpretive tradition on the Qur'ānic Jesus materials is important because, while scripture leaves many questions unanswered, the commentaries tell us what Muslims have understood from scripture, and it is these understandings that have been passed on for more than a millennium.

An established trend in the commentaries is the understanding that the first eighty verses or so of the third *sūra* were recited at the time of the visit of a delegation of Christians from Najrān to Maḍīna. In this narrative, the Christians are said to make a series of confessions related to the deity of Jesus in the presence of Islam's messenger. The messenger then recites the material about Jesus up to the claim at verse 62, "This is the true story." That material includes a statement about the death of Jesus (Q 3:55) and the deity of Jesus (3:59).

The *Tafsīr* of Muqātil ibn Sulaymān (d. 150/767), the earliest extant complete commentary, offered the story of the Najrān delegation in his interpretation of Q 3:59. Already in his explanations at the beginning of *sūra* 3, however, Muqātil indicated what he perceived to be the Christian confession that the recitation was to refute: "Īsā is God." Muqātil's story begins with an interesting question from the Najrān Christians to the messenger of Islam. "O Muḥammad, why do you abuse (*shatama*) and dishonor (*āba*) our master (*ṣāhib*)." The Christians then press the messenger with arguments for Jesus' divine Sonship. According to Muqātil the messenger responds, "God forbid that he should have a son (*walad*) or that there be a god with him." He also then recites the text of Q 3:59, "The likeness of Īsā with God is as Adam's likeness; he created him of dust, then said to him, 'Be!' and he was."

One of the key issues for Muqātil and other commentators was the authority of the messenger of Islam to pronounce on the identity of Jesus. This is how they understood the scriptural statements "the truth from your Lord" (Q 3:60) and "this is certainly the true narrative (*qaṣaṣ*)" (Q 3:63). The passage itself indicates a polemical encounter in Q 3:61 ("Whoever argues with you after knowledge has come to you..."); it seems to propose a resolution of the disagreement about the identity of Jesus in a ceremony of mutual cursing. At Q 3:64, Muqātil described a behind-the-scene conversation in which the 'Āqib ("Successor") of the Christians counsels his companions to decline the

ceremony. If the messenger of Islam is lying, he reasons, cursing him will not do any good. If the messenger is honest, then God would destroy the liars by the end of the year. Instead, the Najrān Christians settle for terms.

Though technically the words about Jesus are understood by Muslims to be revealed by God for the messenger to recite (“Say,” Q 3:64), commentators like al-Bayḍāwī (d. ca. 685/1286) clearly saw the *sūra* 3 dispute to be between the messenger and the Christians. Al-Bayḍāwī and his predecessor al-Zamakhsharī (d. 538/1144) characterized the entire passage as a kind of model of catechetical skill and compelling polemic.

Muqātil and most subsequent commentators then interpreted Q 3:64 as referring to – in their terms – false beliefs of Christians about Jesus. “People of the Book! Come now to a word common between us and you, that we worship none but God, and that we associate nothing with Him, and do not some of us take others as Lords, apart from God.” Christians were wrong, wrote the commentators, to worship Jesus, to associate him with God, and to take Jesus as Lord. The call to Christians was thus to submit to the Islamic concept of God. In fact, many commentators cross-referenced Q 9:30–1, with its strong expressions of condemnation and its political context. This is quite different from how Q 3:64 has been used in a significant interfaith initiative in recent years.

The discussion of Jesus’ miracles in the commentaries is a good example of an effort to circumscribe the possible implications of the Qur’ānic material and make it conform to widely held Muslim understandings about Jesus. One of the points at issue was that the Qur’ān uses the verb “create” (*khalaqa*) with Jesus as subject: “I create a bird out of clay for you” (Q 3:49; cf. 5:110). Another issue was the repeated expression “by God’s leave” (Q 3:49) or “by my leave” (Q 5:110) interspersed among the reports of other miracles.

The Qur’ānic text clearly states that Jesus creates (*akhluqu*, Q 3:49; *takhluqu*, Q 5:110) a bird from clay. Elsewhere in the Qur’ān, the verb *khalaqa* occurs 171 times in the active voice. Of these occurrences, God is the subject in no fewer than 162 instances. In eight of the remaining nine instances, the verb is used mockingly in relation to false claims for pagan deities or humans. However, the exegetes did not opt to cross-reference or conduct a word study in the case of the two occurrences where Jesus is the subject. Instead, commentators like al-Qurṭubī interpreted *khalaqa* to mean “fashion and measure,” “shape,” or “determine.” Al-Qurṭubī added a story that the bird continued to fly so long as people were looking, but when it vanished from their sight it fell dead. This was, wrote al-Qurṭubī, “in order that the action of the creature might be distinguished from that of the Creator.”

The exegetes offered corresponding explanations of the repeating expressions, “by God’s permission” (Q 3:49) and “by my permission” (Q 5:110). Jesus healed the blind and the leper and gave life to the dead, according to the Qur’ān. The potential difficulty of this affirmation, wrote the modern commentator Ṭabāṭabā’ī (d. 1981) at Q 3:49, is that “credulous people could attribute divinity to one who gives life to dead matter or a dead corpse.” The expression “by God’s permission” is therefore added to prevent such thoughts. Al-Zamakhsharī wrote at Q 3:49 that “by God’s leave” is a rebuttal of any who would attribute deity to Jesus because of what he did. And at Q 5:110 Fakhr

al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1210) specified that the miracles described in these verses originated in God's power rather than in Jesus' creative power. In all of this discussion of the miracles of Jesus, the exegetes show virtually no awareness of the Christian tradition, whether canonical Gospel accounts, apocryphal writings, or subsequent theological discussion.

Muslim commentary on the verses referring to the death of Jesus has been extensive and fascinating. Most exegetes took the enigmatic expression in Q 4:157, *shubbiha lahum*, in the direction of a narrative about the transference of the appearance of Jesus onto another. Exegetes wrote, evidently from a very early stage, that when Jesus was about to be arrested and taken to be crucified, God saved him by causing another person in the scene to look like Jesus. The authorities then seized the other person instead and crucified him, while Jesus escaped the danger and God "took him up to himself" (Q 4:158). Exegetes suggested a range of possible characters who received the appearance of Jesus, from Simon of Cyrene to Judas. Muqātil, it seems, did not yet know a name to offer so simply called the unfortunate man a spy (*raqīb*) that the Jews had engaged to keep an eye on Jesus.

This "substitution theory," however, was not favored by all commentators. Al-Rāzī devoted extensive discussion to the theory at both Q 3:55 and 4:157 in a series of *ishkāl*, or "ambiguities." His main difficulty was that, should the substitution interpretation be true, people would not be able to trust sense perception. The fundamental principle in all widely transmitted reports, wrote al-Rāzī at Q 3:55, is that the first narrator must report what he clearly perceived with his senses. Christians have reported that they witnessed the death and crucifixion of Jesus. If what is seen and reported by eyewitnesses is said to be subject to erroneous confusion, this will affect widely accepted reports – including even the claims of Islam for its messenger. "Opening the door of this possibility begins with confusion or sophistry and ends with the total negation of the prophethood of all prophets," al-Rāzī concluded.

Al-Rāzī also highlighted the implications of the substitution theory for God's character. He questioned the purpose of God's casting the likeness of Jesus onto an innocent man who was subsequently condemned to death and killed. He reasons that, if the witnesses believed that the substituted man was Jesus while Jesus was taken up to heaven, this would mean that the people were deliberately thrown into confusion and ignorance. "And this," judged al-Rāzī, "is not worthy of the wisdom of God." That it was worthy of God, however, was exactly what many exegetes understood from the verse immediately preceding Q3:55. "And they deceived (*makarū*), and God deceived, and God is the best of deceivers" (Q 3:54). This means, explained Muqātil, that the Jews deceived ʿĪsā in their attempt to kill him, then God deceived the Jews when they killed their spy and associate.

After presenting his objections to the substitution theory in compelling fashion, al-Rāzī in any case affirmed the truth of his understanding of Q 3:55 and 4:157 that Jesus did not die. He explained at Q 3:55, "Since the veracity of Muḥammad in all that he reported has been established by unquestionable miracles, it is impossible that these objections be taken as evidence against the incontrovertible truth of the text."

The apparent connection in Q 9:29–33 between theological error and military domination is also understood and extended by classical commentators such as Ibn Kathīr. Again, al-Rāzī offered some very interesting reflections on how Christians managed to escape the sword for their confession that the Messiah is the son of God (Q 9:30). He wrote that Christians are actually worse unbelievers than “associators” (*mushrikūn*), because associators do not say that their idol is the Creator or God of the universe. “Christians, on the other hand, profess divine incarnation (*hulūl*) and merged oneness (*ittiḥād*). This is truly abominable unbelief (*kufṛ qabīḥ jiddan*).” Associators have two choices in Q 9:5, according to al-Rāzī – death or conversion to Islam. Christians deserve the same fate for their beliefs, or even worse, but according to al-Rāzī were given a third choice, *jizya*, on a kind of technicality. Their outward connection to Moses and Jesus, and to the Torah and Gospel, spared them from death. Following al-Zamakhsharī, al-Rāzī describes *jizya* as a kindness from God that Christians don’t actually deserve.

Medieval Trends

The major themes of Muslim–Christian debate during the medieval period included many specifically related to Jesus: the Trinity, incarnation, the Sonship of Jesus, the crucifixion, and redemption. Anti-Christian arguments were very consistent in different kinds of Arabic literature and were based on Qur’ānic statements such as Q 5:72–5 and *sūra* 112. The mood of the writing was polemical.

Muslim scholars from all parts of the Islamic Empire addressed themselves to refute the Christological beliefs of Christianity, among them Abū ‘Īsā al-Warrāq (d. ca. 247/860), al-Jāḥiẓ (d. 255/869), al-Māturīdī (d. 333/944), and ‘Abd al-Jabbār (d. 415/1025). Important later polemicists include Ibn Ḥazm (d. 456/1064), al-Qarāfī (d. 684/1285), Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328), and Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya (d. 751/1350). These writers portrayed Christian confessions about Jesus as tantamount to *kufṛ* (unbelief, blasphemy) or *shirk* (“associating”). To their minds, they were targeting orthodox Christian beliefs and practices rather than heretical views. Some described in some detail the understandings they had heard from Christians. They dealt with doctrines like incarnation on a rationalistic basis and described the implications of Christian belief in order to argue for its absurdity.

One well-known work by al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111) or Pseudo al-Ghazālī, “The fitting refutation of the deity of Jesus through the evidence of the Gospel” (Massignon 1932), followed a less-trodden path to make a similar point. Acknowledging that the Gospel accounts speak of Jesus as the Son of God, the writer argued that the use of Son of God in those passages is figurative. The writer processed the Gospel texts through an interesting hermeneutical grid: if such passages were opposed to reason or seemed to resist a rational explanation, they should be interpreted through *ta’wīl*, that is, metaphorically. The writer’s refutation of the Christian belief in the deity of Jesus rested on giving metaphorical interpretations to many passages from the Gospel accounts which either clearly present or strongly imply the deity of Jesus.

Christian Backgrounds

Many academic scholars from an earlier period sought to account for the material on Jesus in the Qurʾān by either finding Christian groups in the Middle East during the seventh century whose beliefs the Qurʾān supposedly echoes, or explaining Qurʾānic material as opposing beliefs of heretical Christian groups. More recent scholarship, especially in the last forty years, has proposed a more complex relationship between the contents of the Qurʾān and its Middle Eastern context. Discussions of Christian backgrounds to the Qurʾānic material must include the witness of early monuments such as the Dome of the Rock, and the discussions in early Christian–Muslim “dialogues” that purport to come from the early centuries of Islam.

Some scholars have suggested that the Qurʾān’s teaching that Jesus did not die may have come from Docetist beliefs. Others have found a similarity between the low Christology of the Qurʾān and the beliefs of the Ebionites. Scholars have variously claimed the influence of Monophysites and Nestorians, Tritheists and Monothelites. All the speculation has until now proven inconclusive, however, because there is no version or brand of Christianity that held the Qurʾān’s particular *set* of beliefs about Jesus.

The evidence of early Christian–Muslim dialogues – the dating of which is often disputed – is that the Muslim antagonists perceived the Qurʾānic material on Jesus to address orthodox Christian beliefs and practices. The dialogue attributed to the Nestorian Patriarch Timothy, the correspondence attributed to the Byzantine emperor Leo III and the Umayyad caliph ʿUmar II, and the “Apology” of ʿAbd al-Masīḥ ibn Ishāq al-Kindī (d. 215/830), among similar works, all concern disputes about the identity of Jesus according to common Qurʾānic and biblical understandings. Muslim participants launched their claims or refutations from passages like Q 4:157, 4:171, and 5:72–7. The exchange of views typically focused on the death of Jesus, the deity of Jesus and his divine Sonship, the Trinity and the Incarnation, and the extent to which the Qurʾānic “word” (*kalima*, Q 3:39, 3:45, 4:171) could be brought into line with the Gospel affirmation, “In the beginning was the Word...” (John 1:1).

The Dome of the Rock inscriptions suggest that some of the Qurʾānic materials on Jesus, at least, arose amid a clash of religious claims between emerging Islam and the People of the Book. As described above, the Dome inscriptions offer possibly the earliest written indication of the beliefs of the emerging faith. Jerusalem, at the time of the construction of the Dome, was a city populated by Christians. The inscriptions mention the name of ʾĪsā three times amid substantial anti-Sonship and anti-associate passages. Interspersed in these denials is the name Muḥammad, five times on the Outer Face of the galleries, once on the Inner Face, once over the East Door, and three times over the North Door. The basic claim for Muḥammad is that he is the messenger of God (five times in the Dome inscriptions). However, the inscriptions also repeat the claim after three occurrences of Muḥammad, “God and his angels pray upon (or “for,” *ṣalā ʿalā*) the prophet,” as well as the command, “O you who believe, pray upon him and salute.” They also add the prayer “May God give him intercession” in a short form above the Outer Face of the gallery and in a more elaborate form over the East Door. Above the North Door, most of the text is about Muḥammad, including, “Muḥammad is the servant of

God and his envoy, whom he sent with guidance and the religion of truth to proclaim it over all religions, even though the associators hate it. Let us believe in God and what was revealed to Muḥammad.” The inscriptions above the inner gallery also declare, “The religion of God is Islam.” Intertwined with this claim of religious supersession are apparent expressions of a change of political domination. Above the East Door is written, “You give sovereignty (*mulk*) to whom you will, and withdraw sovereignty from whom you will.”

This pattern may not be readily recognizable from the Qurʾān because of the sparse occurrence of the name Muḥammad there. However, passages such as Q 9:29–33 condemn perceived confessions about Jesus in the midst of affirmations about God’s messenger and the religion of truth (Q 9:29, 33). Similarly, the strong expression against the deity of Jesus in Q 5:17 is bracketed by the exhortation, “O People of the Book! Now has our messenger come unto you explaining to you...” (Q 5:15, 19). And *sūra* 33, which contains one of the four Qurʾānic mentions of Muḥammad (Q 33:40), presents the claim and accompanying command, “God and his angels pray upon the prophet. O you who believe: Pray upon him and salute!” (Q 33:56). Interestingly, the expression in the Dome inscriptions, “You give sovereignty to whom you will, and withdraw sovereignty from whom you will,” is extended in Q 3:26 with, “you exalt whom you will and abase whom you will.” These indications suggest that a key issue with the identity of Jesus, at least in parts of the Qurʾān, was the authority of Muḥammad.

Contemporary Discussions

The main trend in modern Muslim polemic and Qurʾān commentary is to affirm the truth of the Qurʾān in all its statements about Jesus. Wherever there is a clash of claims for the identity of Jesus between the Qurʾān and the New Testament, the general impulse of many Muslim thinkers continues to be to accuse the New Testament of corruption or falsification. A story about Paul distorting the allegedly Islamic origins of Christianity continues to be used. And some Muslim polemicists continue to put forward the spurious *Gospel of Barnabas*, a medieval Islamic forgery, as the authentic account of Jesus in contradiction to the canonical Gospel accounts. However, not all Muslim statements about Jesus take the disagreement in the same direction.

One discussion that may be taken as a sign of the persistence of medieval themes is the discussion of the name given for Jesus in the Qurʾān, *ʿĪsā*. From an etymological perspective, scholar James Bellamy wrote that *ʿĪsā* is a mistake in the Qurʾān, a corruption and misreading of the Arabic *Masīḥ* (“Messiah”). However, in an extensive discussion in the *Encyclopaedia of the Qurʾān*, Neal Robinson presented the many possible verdicts on the Qurʾānic name and stated, “[i]t is just possible that *ʿĪsā* was actually Jesus’ original name” (Robinson 2003).

A modern initiative that showed an interesting Muslim approach to Jesus was a public letter from Muslim leaders posted to the Internet October 13, 2007, known as “A Common Word between Us and You” (Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought 2007). The letter proposed that Christians and Muslims have something “in common”

in the theme of loving God and loving one's neighbor, and drew the language of "a common word" from Q 3:64. In making its case, the statement quoted in a straightforward way from Jesus' words in Matthew 22:34–40 and Mark 12:29–31: "In the New Testament, Jesus Christ said: 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one'...." The willingness to quote from the New Testament in a positive way, and to say that these words are the words of Jesus, remains a rarity in Muslim–Christian discourse.

And yet, such is the ambiguity of interfaith dialogue that even in this case, the intent may not be clear. Quoting Jesus as affirming the oneness of God and commanding love to God could be seen as a way of highlighting an important (and traditionally polemical) Muslim theme. Further, using Q 3:64 to mean to say that Muslims and Christians share beliefs "in common," in contrast to the understanding of Q 3:64 in Muslim commentary and polemic for 1,200 years, raises questions about the strength of the scriptural foundation of the letter. A comparable interfaith event documented in the 1979 collection, *We Believe in One God: The Experience of God in Christianity and Islam*, began with a kind of full stop. Yes, we can talk together about God, said Smail Balić. However, do not bring Jesus into the discussion, Balić instructed, because in Islamic terms Jesus has nothing to do with theology (Balić 1979: 1).

The majority of modern Muslim writing on Jesus, in fact, continues to be polemical. The influential work *Izhār al-ḥaqq*, by Indian theologian Raḥmat Allāh Kayrānwī, circulates widely in South Asia more than 150 years after its publication in 1864. The work mounts a major attack on the Trinity and the deity of Jesus, in addition to accusing the Bible of corruption. The *Izhār* has become a sourcebook of polemic for several generations of Muslim writers and speakers, from print and video cassette to websites and YouTube. Prominent polemicists who have followed in this tradition include South Africa's Ahmed Deedat (d. 2005), Canada's Shabbir Ali, and India's Zakir Naik.

A significant indicator of modern Muslim thinking about Jesus in an age of Islamist militancy is the writing of Sayyid Quṭb (d. 1966) in his Qur'ān commentary, *Fī zilāl al-Qur'ān*. At the beginning of his commentary on the first part of the third *sūra*, for example, Quṭb connected what he took to be the errors of Christian belief about Jesus with the political and military struggles between Muslims and the People of the Book. He saw the first step in the attack of the enemies of Islam to be their effort to shake the faith of the Muslims. He wrote that this battle continues up to the present, and that the enemies are the same "unbelievers and rejecters: international Zionism and international crusadism" (Ayoub 1992: 6). It is interesting that in his widely read *Milestones*, Quṭb interpreted Q 3:64 not as an interfaith statement about beliefs held in common, but rather as a call to *jihād*.

Quṭb again discussed the Qur'ānic portrait of Jesus at Q 9:29–34. Quṭb followed the medieval trend of a strong attack on non-Muslim beliefs alongside exclusive claims for the truth of Islam. Striking in Quṭb's interpretations – though not entirely disconnected from medieval commentary – is his readiness to link perceived false confessions about Jesus with Islamist violence. He asserts at Q 9:29 that Christian belief in the deity of Jesus represents an attack on the deity of God, and thus an attack on Muslims. The battle has already been initiated from the Christian side by these false beliefs, according to Quṭb, therefore *jihād* is a natural and appropriate response. The style of *Fī zilāl* is

attractive to many Muslims and ensures that the commentary continues to have a wide circulation and extensive influence.

When it comes to their understanding of the Qur'ānic materials on Jesus, it is interesting to speculate about what Muslims will emphasize in the future. Will a new generation be attracted by the polite conventions of interfaith dialogue or by the uncompromising assertions of Islamist exegesis? Or will a new approach possibly emerge? Will the Qur'ānic material on ʿĪsā someday be allowed to interact with the biblical portrait of Jesus, or will the two views simply continue forward on parallel tracks?

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