

# Jesus

## Jesus: A Christian Perspective

Dr. Steven J. McMichael

Christians believe that Jesus is the incarnate God: he is the Logos (Word) of God who is not only equal to God (John 1:1-3) but also became flesh (John 1:14) and lived among us. Christians use the word “begotten” in the sense that the Word was eternally born of the father without beginning or end. He became incarnate to save us from sin and death by the power of the Spirit and the willingness (fiat) of Mary to be the Mother of God.

The Gospels of Luke and Matthew in their Infancy Narratives present the incarnation in a different way. Luke tells us that the Holy Spirit came upon Mary and the power of the Holy Spirit “overshadowed” her and she conceived Jesus without a human father (Luke 1:35). Matthew speaks of this reality as “she was found with child through the power of the Spirit.” (Matthew 1:18) This is referred to in the Christian tradition as the “virgin birth,” which emphasizes Jesus special birth as the Son of God which no other human being has ever experienced.

The Apostle Paul generally speaks of Jesus in functional terms (what Jesus does for us) than ontological terms (the divine being). He uses terms such as “Lord” and “Savior” for Jesus that emphasize how we are redeemed and saved through our faith in what God has done through Jesus and the Holy Spirit. He speaks also of Jesus as the “icon” of God, as the perfect representative of God’s being and love. John says the same thing when he tells us that Jesus told Philip: “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.” (John 14:9)

Jesus, because he was the Son of God, experienced a relationship like no other person to God. Jesus referred to God as “Abba” (“daddy”) and appears at times to be subordinate to God: “why do you call me good, none is good but God” and “the father is greater than I.” Jesus himself directs us to pray to God the Father (as in the “Our Father”) though Christians also quite early on prayed to Jesus also. But in John’s Last Supper Discourse (chapters 13-17) Jesus expresses the unity that he shared with the Father (“the Father and I are one”). This unique relationship that Jesus shared with God the Father is at the heart of the entire Christian mystery.

When Christians are baptized, they are sealed with a special anointing by which the minister proclaims: “As Christ was anointed Priest, Prophet, and King, so may you live always as members of his body, sharing everlasting life.” These three roles are important in early Christian theology. The so-called Letter to the Hebrews speaks of Jesus as the perfect sacrifice which fulfills the promises of the Old Testament and he is presented as the faithful, obedient and compassionate High Priest who performed the perfect sacrifice by his passion and death at the hands of Pilate.

Christians believe that Jesus was the Messiah who took on the characters of the Suffering Servant (Isaiah 40-55) whose actions of vicarious atonement were instrumental in the transformation and liberation from slavery to sin and death. Jesus preached about the Reign or Kingdom of God: The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the good news (Mark 1:15). This meant that God's dynamic presence was breaking into the world and was actively present in Jesus' words and actions. Jesus was also the "Prophet of prophets" by his preaching of the word of God and calling people to repentance, righteousness and justice. He was also the prophet who fully revealed God's definitive will to all humanity. He is not just the proclaimer of God's revelation, he is in his divine/human personhood God's revelation.

He was "king" in the sense that he was the embodiment of the Kingdom of God that he proclaimed in his preaching and demonstrated in his ministry. Jesus, after his resurrection and ascension, is now considered to be Lord of the World and will be its final judge.

Christians hold that Jesus lived a fully human life and shared everything human with the rest of humanity except he was without sin. Because of his preaching about the Reign of God, which to Roman ears would have sounded as if he were speaking of setting up another kingdom or empire in the place of Rome, he was tried and crucified under the Roman leader Pilate. It is the passion and death of Jesus which has been the centerpiece of Christian piety and spirituality because they understand that Jesus died because of the sins of humankind. In doing so, he conquered the power of the evil and death.

Jesus not only preached about the Reign of God, he also demonstrated this message through miracles. They were an external confirmation of his message and a vehicle for that message. They were "revelation stories" in that his words and miraculous deeds gave expression to the advent of God's redemptive power. They also were signs of the full manifestation of the Reign of God at the end of time (the eschatological reality).

Christians also believe that Jesus rose from the dead. This is spoken of as God's vindication of Jesus' faithfulness to God the Father and God's ultimate and definitive rescue of Jesus from the powers of evil and death. The entire Christian faith has its foundation in the Resurrection of Jesus from the dead. As the Apostle Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 15, without Jesus' resurrection from the dead, the Christian faith is meaningless and in vain. Because of his resurrection from the dead, all believers have firm hope in their own resurrection. Because of his death and resurrection, Jesus is believed to be the Redeemer of sin and death for humanity.

There are two ways of viewing Jesus as found in the New Testament according to Christian theology. "Low" Christology as emphasized by the Gospel of Mark shows how the human Jesus was gradually recognized as the divine one during his lifetime and fully known to be so after his resurrection. "High" Christology, as exemplified in the Gospel of John, starts with the divinity of Jesus (the Logos who is equal to and is in relationship with Theos [God the Father]) and shows how he became incarnate and lived as a human being until his death and resurrection, after which he became Lord of the World (he now sits at the right hand of the Father).

The two Christologies were discussed and debated in the early Christian centuries and they are reconciled at the Ecumenical Council that was held at Chalcedon (451) in which both the full humanity and divinity of Christ were upheld. The council taught that in the incarnation of Jesus there are two distinct natures, the divine and the human. These natures are united without separation and without confusion in a single person, Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Further Christological thought determined that Jesus was fully human in that he had a human free will and soul.

Jesus will also reappear at the end of the world and be the instrument not only of the resurrection of all human beings, but he will also act as the judge of all humankind at the Last Judgment (Matthew 25). God's righteous will live with him forever in blessed eternal life.

Jesus: Peace be upon him

Owais Bayunus

Jesus of Nazareth is the most widely revered religious figure in the World. Many in the West do not know that he is not only central to Christianity, World's largest religion with over 1.5 billion followers; he is also revered throughout Islam, the world's second largest faith, with over 1.2 billion Muslims. Islam places Jesus as one of the greatest messengers of God and Qur'an addresses him as The Messiah. Muslims, like Christians believe in the Virgin Birth of Jesus, in his miracles, and the second coming of Jesus before the end of the World, and this shared belief in him and his message goes much further.

Although most of the Islamic information about Jesus is found in the Quran (1), a Muslim also derives his concept of Jesus from several other Islamic sources, such as devotional texts, Islamic ethics and culture, the Muslim mystic tradition, histories of the prophets and saints, and collections of Prophet Muhammad's sayings and events in his life, known as the Hadith (2). From these writings emerges a picture that affirms Jesus' very special place in humanity: Though Christianity and Islam diverge on the mega-question related to Jesus' divinity, both faiths understand Jesus to be fully human and reserve a singular privileged place for him among human beings. Both traditions consider Jesus, son of Mary, a Word from God (kalimah or logos), and a spirit emanating from God (Ruhullah).

In Islamic tradition different terms have been applied to Jesus, each term capturing a different aspect of his role and identity. "Son of Mary", the designation most often applied to Jesus in the Qur'an, highlights his miraculous birth and the very fact of his existence, in contrast to the Gospels which follow more or less a progressive theme, steadily building toward Christ's crucifixion and resurrection.

Both the Christian and Islamic tradition describes him as a word (logos or kalimah) from God. But, the interpretation of the logos in Christian theology differs markedly from the interpretation of the kalimah by Muslim scholars. For the Christian, according to the

Gospel of John, the Word was God and the Word became flesh.' For the Muslim, on the other hand, the Word is creature and to call Christ the word of Allah is not to deify him, but to verify his status as prophet. Because of his high status as a prophet of God, Jesus becomes a manifestation of God, one who conveys the message of God, one who can speak on behalf of God, the Word of God Jesus becomes the Word of God not because of an incarnation whereby his flesh becomes divine, but because his spirit is refined to such an extent that it becomes a mirror whereby divinity comes to be known. A mosque is holy not because of any inherent sanctity in its structure or the material used, but because it is the place of the worship of God.

Jesus is the only prophet addressed by God in Qur'an as Ruhullah, meaning a spirit emanating from God. Although Muslims believe that every soul comes from God, but the special annunciation of Jesus with a Ruh (Spirit) from God leads us to believe that there was something unique in the birth and character of Jesus. Muslims believe that he was a symbol of austerity and humbleness and was extremely pious. He prayed to God in complete humility with his forehead on the ground, asking His help and forgiveness. Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) has described in great details the second coming of Jesus, prior to the destruction of the World. At that time, he will save the World from the excesses of Dajjal, commonly known in the west as Anti-Christ. Muslims in the World today are waiting anxiously for the coming back of the Messiah as several of Prophet Muhammad's (pbuh) prophecies about the end of the World (and Jesus' return) have already been fulfilled.

Among the miracles of Jesus, according to Qur'an, is the curing of those born blind, healing the lepers and even bringing the dead back to life. Muslims believe in the chastity of Mary who as virgin gave birth to Jesus. Believed only by Muslims and not described in any Christian tradition, is the very first miracle of Jesus, who, as a newly born infant in the cradle, spoke out for the glory of his Lord and in defense of his mother to the people accusing her. That incident placed a seal on the mouth of those accusing Mary of any wrong doing as they knew an unusual divinely inspired birth had taken place for which Mary couldn't be blamed.

God addresses Jesus in the following words:

" O Jesus! I will take you and raise you to Myself and clear you of blaspheme. I will make your followers superior to those who reject faith until the Day of Resurrection, then you will all return to Me & I will judge in matters you differed "(Qur'an 3:55)

Muslims revere Jesus as can be seen by the name Issa (Jesus) common among the Muslims. When the name of Jesus or of any other Prophet is mentioned in a conversation, you will see that many devout Muslims would quietly say, "Peace and blessings of God be upon him". When a film "Jesus Christ Superstar" was shown in a theatre in Karachi (Pakistan), the show had to be stopped due to a strong protest by the Muslim audience, who in reverence to the great Prophet did not want that film to run in a Muslim country. It is not permitted in Islam to make pictures and statues of Jesus, as it is not permitted of any other prophet and saintly figure.

Abu Dharr, a companion of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh), was once an extremely rich man, who had given up all his wealth in charity after embracing Islam and totally devoted himself in the pursuit of God. The Prophet compared him to the likeness of Jesus. The Prophet said to other companions, "If you want to see the image of Jesus, look at Abu Dharr."

Mary is considered the purest woman in all creation. The Quran describes the Annunciation as follows:

'Behold!' the Angel said, 'God has chosen you, and purified you, and chosen you above the women of all nations. O Mary, God gives you good news of a word from Him, whose name shall be the Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, honored in this world and the Hereafter, and one of those brought near to God. He shall speak to the people from his cradle and in maturity, and shall be of the righteous.'

She said: 'O my Lord! How shall I have a son when no man has touched me?' He said: 'Even so; God creates what He will. When He decrees a thing, He says to it, "Be!" and it is.' (Quran, 3:42-7)

Qur'an describes the birth of Jesus in the following words:

Surah (Chapter): Maryam 19:16.

"And mention in the Book (The Qur'an, O Muhammad) about Mary when withdrew in seclusion from her family to a place in the East (Bethlehem). She placed a screen to hide herself from them; then We sent to her Our Ruh (Angel Gabriel), and he appeared before her in the form of a man in all respects.

She said, "I seek refuge with the Most Beneficent (Allah) from you if you do fear Allah".

(The Angel) said," I am only a messenger from your Lord (to announce) to you the gift of a righteous son."

She said, "How can I have a son, when no man has touched me, nor am I unchaste?"

He said, "So it will be. Your Lord said: That is easy for Me: and We wish to appoint him as a sign unto men and a mercy from Us. It is a matter so decreed".

So she conceived him, and she retired with him to a remote place. And the pains of childbirth drove her to a trunk of a palm tree:

She cried in her anguish "Ah! Would that I had died before this! Would that I had been a thing forgotten and out of sight!"

But a voice cried to her from beneath the Palm Tree, "Grieve not! For your Lord has provided a rivulet beneath you. 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 man, say "I have vowed a fast to Allah Most Gracious, and this day will I enter into no talk with any human being".

At length she brought the babe to her people, carrying him in her arms.

They said: "O Maryam, truly an amazing thing have you brought! O sister of Aaron! Your father was not a man of evil, nor your mother is a woman unchaste!"

But she pointed to the Babe. They said, "How can we talk to someone who is a child in the cradle?"

He (Jesus) said, "I am indeed a servant of Allah(the God): He has given me revelation and made me a Prophet; and He has made me blessed wheresoever I be, and has enjoined upon me prayer and charity as long as I live. He has made me kind to my mother, and not overbearing and miserable. So Peace is on me the day I was born, the day that I will die, and the day that I shall be raised up to life again!"

Such was Jesus, the son of Mary. It is a statement of truth about which they vainly dispute. It is not befitting to the Majesty of Allah (The God) that He should beget a son. Glory be to Him! When he determines a matter, He only says to it, "Be" -- and it is.

Jesus said" Verily Allah (The God) is my Lord and your Lord. So worship Him alone. That is the straight path". ---- God has spoken the Truth.

During his prophetic mission Jesus performed many miracles. The Qur'an tells us that he said:

"I have come to you with a sign from your Lord: I make for you out of clay, as it were, the figure of a bird, and breathe into it and it becomes a bird by God's leave. And I heal the blind, and the lepers and I raise the dead by God's leave." (Qur'an, 3:49)

Christians and Muslims give mutually exclusive answers to question about the crucifixion of Jesus and his deification. While crucifixion is vital to the development of Christianity as for as the atonement from eternal sin and the belief in Trinity is concerned, according to Qur'an Jesus was lifted up and some one else made to resemble to them like Jesus was crucified. Muslims believe that one can find God in Jesus without deifying him, and furthermore that deifying Jesus is really an obstacle to finding God in him, for in the deification one ceases to look in Jesus for anything beyond him. It is as if one were to become distracted from a message by focusing one's attention on the words through which it was conveyed. Many Muslim scholars argue that not only does the doctrine of the incarnation prevent one from finding God in Christ, but it also prevents one from seeing Christ the man, because his imagined divinity gets in the way.

A great deal of importance is given to the miraculous side of Jesus' story and that has overshadowed his role as a prophet and a messenger of God. There are more important

questions for Muslims and Christians to find the answers from the life of Jesus than whether he cured those born blind or raised the dead.

In Qur'anic Muslim view, Jesus' essential work was not to replicate magic bread or to test our credulity, but to establish the legality of Torah with a leavening compassion rarely expressed in the older testament and to make lawful part of which was forbidden in the older testament. His actions and words give a new dimension to the concept of monotheism: They develop the merciful spirit of God's nature. Jesus confirmed the Torah, stressing the continuity of his lineage, but he also developed the importance of compassion and self-purification as crucial links between learning the words of God's message and possessing the wisdom to carry it out.

Qur'an says Jesus came,

"To attest the law which was before me (Torah), And to make lawful to you part of what was forbidden you; I have come to you with a sign from your Lord, so fear God and obey me." (Qur'an, 3:50)

Agreements, Disagreements, and Points for Further Discussion

Points of Agreement:

Muslims and Christians agree that Jesus was a great prophet, was born of a Virgin, and performed miracles. Both Muslims and Christians have traditionally held that Jesus will return at the end of history. Muslims think he will marshal the faithful and defeat the antichrist; most Christians have held that Christ himself will return in the role of judge, though in fact the bible is not clear as to whether God will be the judge of the dead, or Jesus—passages can be found supporting both positions (see the entry on "Death, Judgment, Heaven, and Hell").

Points of Disagreement:

Unlike Jews and Muslims, Christians have held that Jesus is the incarnation of the *Logos* (John 1), the 'Word' of God. Jesus is said to be the 'Son' of God both in the bible and in the Nicene Creed. In Christian theology, Jesus is a divine person, the second person of the trinity, with two natures, a human nature and a divine nature. (His human nature was taken on when he was conceived as a human being in the womb of Mary.) Muslims (and Jews) reject this. The Quran says that Allah had no consort or son. It is worth noting, however, that Christians have never taught that God had a consort, or that Jesus is the son of God in a polytheistic sense. Christians have always affirmed the unity of the triune God. Christians are not going to give up the teaching in the Trinity or the divinity of Jesus, and Muslims are not going to accept them, so this seems to be an irreconcilable difference between the two religions, indeed, probably the deepest difference.

Points for Discussion.

First, Christians need to explain better their idea of the Triune God to Muslims and others who find the teaching incomprehensible. The Trinity does not mean  $1+1+1 = 1$ ; or  $1= 3$ . True, if God were a collection of finite things the teaching on the trinity would make no sense. But God is infinite, and the three persons of God are not three individuals in Christian thought, much less three deities.

Secondly, Muslims themselves have debated as to whether the Quran as it exists in the mind of God was created or uncreated. This debate parallels the Christian debate with Arianism: was the Word or *Logos* of God (which became incarnate in Jesus) created or uncreated (Christians concluded that it was uncreated; Arians claimed it was created)? This may be a point for further discussion.

Thirdly, the Muslim charge—expressed by Owais Bayunis in his article above—that Christian worship might end up focusing on the humanity of Jesus, rather than on God, needs to be taken seriously by Christians. The issue is: is there such a thing in orthodox Christianity as Jesus-olatry, i.e. an idolatrous worship of Jesus? This is hardly ever discussed by Christians themselves, but probably should be.