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WHO WAS JESUS?

For Muslims, Jesus is one of the five elite prophets, and he will come again at the end of time to bring peace. Although Muslims and Christians have a very similar idea of Jesus as far as his birth, general personality, and second coming are concerned, there are major differences in the way each religion treats Jesus. Muslims do not hold Jesus as the son of God. For Muslims, he is a messenger from God, and beloved of God. Despite the differences, given his importance to both traditions, Jesus is and should be a figure that Muslims and Christians can rally around and use as a foundation for dialogue and peace.

To understand Islam’s Jesus, the first thing one should know is that belief in Jesus is one of the major principles of faith in Islam. Belief in all prophets and messengers of God is one of the six articles of faith in Islam. Therefore, when a Muslim utters the statement of faith – “there is no deity but God and Muhammad is the Messenger of God” – from his or her heart, indirectly they are saying that Jesus, like all other prophets and messengers, is a messenger of God.

Muslims believe that there were 124,000 prophets who came before the Prophet of Islam. Not just anyone can be a prophet or a messenger of God: only people of extraordinary character can be one. Muslim theologians have developed five attributes that a prophet of God must possess: trustworthiness, truthfulness, innocence, the ability to convey God’s message, and intelligence. Anyone who lacks one of these principles cannot be accepted as a prophet or a messenger of God. These attributes are indeed attributes that can be said about almost any Christian understanding of Jesus.

There are five prophets who tower above the others. Jesus is one of these prophets, along with Abraham, Moses, Noah, and Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon them all. These five are known collectively as the *ul al-‘azm*:the possessors of steadfastness. Islam views Jesus, and all prophets before him, as well as their faithful followers, as muslims, with a small m. The word muslim in Arabic literally means those who have submitted themselves to the will of God. Since there are no capital letters in Arabic, the term muslim encompasses both muslims and Muslims.

Despite Muslims not believing Jesus is the incarnation of God, there are many aspects of Islam’s Jesus that Christians can recognize. In fact, there are far more shared qualities than there are differences. For instance, Islam’s Jesus was a miracle worker, most famously speaking from his cradle to defend his mother, Mary, over charges of adultery and licentiousness. The Qur’an states that when Mary gave birth to Jesus and brought him to her people, they asked her, “From where did you get your baby?” They wondered how she could have a baby without getting married. Mary pointed at the baby, and Jesus spoke, saying, “I am the servant of God. He has given me the Book [the Gospel] and He has appointed me to be a Prophet” (19:30).

The Qur’an instructs Muslims to love all prophets without distinction; however, for many Muslims, there is a special love for Jesus. This is perhaps because, according to Muslims, Jesus spoke both in the Qur’an and in the Gospel about the coming of the Prophet of Islam. In the Gospel of John, Jesus said, “And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever” (14:16). This Advocate, according to some Muslim theologians, is the Prophet of Islam. In the Qur’an, Jesus said, “O children of Israel! Surely I am the Messenger of God to you, confirming the Torah [that was revealed] before me and giving the good tidings of a Messenger who will come after me, whose name is Ahmad” (60:6). Ahmad comes from the same root as Muhammad, and it is understood that it is another name for the Prophet of Islam.

It is important to look more deeply at what is written in the Qur’an about Jesus. In the Qur’an, Jesus is mainly characterized by his message, which centers on worshipping the One God (5:116–17). Jesus is mentioned in more than ninety verses of the Qur’an. The Qur’anic Jesus is a receiver of Divine scripture. God revealed to him a special message, Injil, the Islamic name for the Gospel (3:48, 5:46-7, 19:30, 57:27). The Qur’an refers to the Gospel as a source of guidance, light, and admonition for God-fearing people (5:46-7). Jesus made certain things, which were forbidden to Israelites, lawful (3:50). Jesus called upon the people to submit themselves to the will of God. Because of this, the Qur’an praises the disciples of Jesus (3:52, 61:14). Therefore, Muslims revere the followers and disciples of Jesus for their struggle in the way of God and their support for Jesus.

The Hadith or the sayings of the Prophet are the second most important source for Islamic theology, and one can also find many references to Jesus in the Hadith. Citing all of these references is beyond the scope of this essay, but I want to look closely at one example. A reliable hadith in al-Bukhari’s *al-Sahih* states that the Prophet saw a dream in which he was circumambulating the Ka’ba, Islam’s holy shrine in Mecca, and while doing so he saw Jesus doing the same. He saw Jesus as very clean, with combed hair.

“In my dream while I was circumambulating the Ka’ba, I saw a man of brown color, the best one can see among brown-colored human beings. His hair was so long that it fell between his shoulders, among the best hairs one can see. He had combed his hair and it was as if water was dripping from his head, and he was on the shoulders of two men circumambulating the Ka’ba. I asked, ‘Who is this?’ They replied, ‘This is Jesus, the son of Mary.’”

Given the importance of cleanliness in Islam, the fact that Jesus is described in this way is significant. It reinforces that Muslims should strive to fulfill his message of peace and serenity, a message proclaimed by the Prophet of Islam.

In the Hadith, there are also around 100 sayings about Jesus’ descent from Heaven, which is analogous to the “Second Coming” in Christian tradition. According to Islamic theology, Jesus will come as a messianic figure with an eschatological role that includes bringing justice and reviving religion. Muslims understand his coming as a promise of change in the course of history and as the onset of the establishment of justice. Jesus, a symbol of goodness, will defeat the Antichrist, a symbol of oppression and evil. This is such an important part of Islam that manuals of Islamic theology refers to the descent of Jesus and his defeat of the Antichrist as a statement of belief.

Because of this theological principle, both classical and modern Muslims have elaborated on the concept. In my book *Islam’s Jesus*, I dedicated two long chapters to this element of Jesus’s role in Islamic theology. Islam does not just accept the idea of fatalistically waiting for the coming of Jesus; individuals must strive to make the world a peaceful place. It must be said though that while the persona of Jesus is as an essential part of Islamic theology, given the many direct references to him and his message in the Qur’an, when it comes to his descent, the case is different. The descent of Jesus is not mentioned in the Qur’an *perse*. However, there are some verses that are considered hints at his descent. For example, 43:61 indicates that Jesus is the Sign of the Hour. Although some commentators interpreted this verse by saying that his miraculous birth, not his descent as the sign of the final Hour, most commentators see this as referring to his descent prior to the Hour.

Like theologians, Muslim mystics also have spoken about Jesus and his message. Sufis like Ibn al-Arabi, Rumi, and al-Sharani, have much to say about Jesus and his role in the Islamic tradition. Once again there are too many examples to discuss; to suffice, I will just mention one from Rumi. In a verse of poetry, Rumi wrote about the power of Jesus’ breath – not the physicality of that breath, but the power hidden in it that raises the dead. Rumi likened a human being to the breath of Jesus. The physical aspect of that breath is weak, but there is a very strong inner aspect of both the breath and the human being. He wrote:

“MAN IS LIKE THE ROD OF MOSES; MAN IS LIKE THE BREATH OF JESUS.”

On another occasion, Rumi compared the nature of Jesus to that of angels:

“JESUS AND IDRIS [ENOCH] ASCENDED TO HEAVEN, SINCE THEY WERE OF THE SAME RACE AS ANGELS.” (FOR MORE INFORMATION ON THIS, SEE MY BOOK, *ISLAM’S JESUS*, PP. 129-130.)

In conclusion, the essences of the teaching of Jesus are love, peace, and compassion. One should remember that all verses of the Qur’an begin with, “In the name of the Most-Compassionate, Most-Merciful.” It is this call to mercy and compassion that can bring together members of all faiths, and particularly members of the Abrahamic faiths. As I argue in my book, the members of the Abrahamic family constitute more than one half of humanity; if they can come together in peace and love, they will go a long way to securing a safe, peaceful future for the world.

Today, humanity needs this message of love, hope, and peace, more than ever. It can be argued that when the Prophet said that Jesus will come as a just ruler, he emphasized the importance of justice and peace on earth. If the trend toward dialogue and cooperation leads to justice and peace in our world, it will mean the fulfillment of the messages of both Muhammad and Jesus, peace and blessings be upon both of them.