

II. ISLAM & JESUS

What Does the Qur'an Say about Jesus?

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Jesus Christ is a revered figure in both Christianity and Islam, yet many Christians in the West today know little about Jesus' importance for Muslims.

Three similarities between the Qur'an's presentation of Jesus and traditional Christian understandings of Jesus merit particular attention.

1. **The Virgin Birth:** Mary, the mother of Jesus, features prominently in the Qur'an. She is the only woman to be mentioned by name in the Qur'an. The Qur'an tells the story of the angels' annunciation to Mary:

When the angels said, "O Mary, indeed God give you good tidings of a word from Him, whose name will be the Messiah, Jesus, the son of Mary." (Q. 3:45)

Mary responds with surprise, asking "how will I have a child when no man has touched me?" (Q. 3:47). Mary is reassured "God creates what God wills" (Q. 3:47). Other details diverge more from the narratives found in the New Testament Gospels, such as Mary giving birth to Jesus under a palm tree (Q. 19:22-26), or the newborn Jesus speaking from the cradle to proclaim to those who questioned Mary's chastity that he is God's servant whom God made a prophet and to whom God entrusted Scripture (Q. 19:30). But the Qur'an very much

affirms Jesus was born of a virgin named Mary, echoing the claims made in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke.

2. **The Miracles of Jesus:** The Qur'an refers to Jesus as one who performed miracles with the permission of God. According to Q. 5:110, Jesus gave sight to the blind, healed lepers, raised the dead, and breathed life into a clay bird. Aside from the last one, these miracles resonate with stories from the New Testament Gospels.
3. **Jesus the Messiah:** The Qur'an applies many titles to Jesus, one of which is Christ or Messiah (*al-masih*). This title is the same one given to Jesus by Christians. The designation does not entail belief in Jesus' divinity for Muslims. It does reflect the special role Jesus has as one sent by God to provide God's people with Scripture and guidance. The Qur'an also alludes to the second coming of Jesus Christ, a theological theme that features prominently in early Christian literature. The Qur'an indicates "Jesus will be [a sign for] knowledge of the Hour" (Q. 43:61). The second coming of Jesus, however, is a theme more fully developed in the *hadith*, or stories of the sayings and deeds of the Prophet Muhammad.

As for the key differences between the Qur'an's presentation of Jesus and the Jesus of traditional Christian thought, three are worth considering.

1. **Jesus Is Not the Son of God:** Although the Qur'an affirms the virgin birth of Jesus, it does not view this event as proof of Jesus divinity, nor does it conceive of Jesus as a pre-existent being. In fact, the Qur'an goes out of its way to reject the notion that Jesus is the Son of God. Jesus is a Muslim, a prophet and messenger sent by God to guide God's people and second only to Muhammad in importance. As a Muslim, Jesus' message was the message of Islam: the oneness of God (*tawhid*). In one chapter, Jesus assures God that he has never claimed to be divine.

And [beware the Day] when God will say, “O Jesus, Son of Mary, did you say to the people, ‘Take me and my mother as deities besides God?’” Jesus will say, “Exalted are You! It was not for me to say that to which I have no right. If I had said it, You would have known it. You know what is within myself, and I do not know what is within Yourself. Indeed, it is You who is Knower of the unseen” (Q. 5:116).

The Qur’an explicitly takes issue with the doctrine of the Trinity and Christian claims that God is one yet has three manifestations.

The Messiah, Jesus, the son of Mary, was but a messenger of God...So believe in God and His messengers. And do not say, “Three”; desist – it is better for you. Indeed, God is but one God. Exalted is He above having a son (4:171).

Jesus is a prominent figure in the Qur’an, but the Qur’an warns against engaging in *shirk*, that is, ascribing a partner to God and thereby rejecting God’s oneness. Traditionally, *shirk* is considered a significant sin in Islam.

2. **Jesus Is Not a Savior:** In light of the Qur’an’s rejection of Jesus’ divinity, it follows that Jesus is not a savior in Islam. In fact, no one functions as a savior in Islam, not even the Prophet Muhammad. God holds each person accountable for her or his beliefs and actions; no assistance from a divine-human intermediary makes salvation possible.
3. **Jesus Was Not Crucified:** Because Islam lacks both a doctrine of original sin and belief in a divine-human intermediary for salvation, there is no pressing theological need for the atoning death of Jesus. In fact, the Qur’an rejects the death of Jesus on the cross not only as a

theological event but as a historical one as well. The relevant passage in the Qur'an describes the crucifixion in this way:

And for their saying, "Indeed, we have killed the Messiah, Jesus, the son of Mary, the messenger of God." And they did not kill him, nor did they crucify him; but [another] was made to resemble him to them. And indeed, those who differ over it are in doubt about it. They have no knowledge of it except the following of assumption. And they did not kill him, for certain. Rather, God raised him to Himself. And ever is God Exalted in Might and Wise (Q: 4:157-158).

The passage is clear in its insistence Jesus was not crucified. The passage is less clear on who "was made to resemble him [Jesus]" and how this is to be interpreted. Muslim scholars have traditionally interpreted this phrase as indicating someone else died in Jesus' place, though they differ on who this was. Theories on who became the "substitute" on the cross range from Judas to a young volunteer disciple. Most agree that Jesus was taken up bodily into heaven instead of being crucified. A dissenting Muslim view is that Jesus was crucified, but instead of dying on the cross, he swooned and was taken down.

The Qur'an does not deny Jesus will one day die, only that he did not die on the cross.

While the differences between the Muslim and Christian Jesus are significant, they are not insurmountable hurdles for interfaith dialogue. The reverence and respect Muslims have for Jesus is considerable. If Christians can develop an appreciation for the prominent role that Jesus has in Islam, they may discover Jesus is more of an opportunity than an obstacle for developing interfaith relationships with their Muslim sisters and brothers.

Response to: “What Does the Qur’an Say about Jesus?”

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Who is Jesus, exactly? It’s a divisive question. It’s the question that usually separates Christianity from other faiths. People’s answers have also led some Christian traditions to separate from others.

But Jesus can be as engaging as he is divisive. People of many faiths share his values. The compassion, generosity, energy, and wisdom he displays in the Gospels make him a magnetic figure. If you’re interested in living a life that reflects the goodness of God, pursuing character steeped in holiness and godliness, admitting and decrying the sinfulness that destroys individuals and the whole of creation, and fostering goodwill in communities, then how can you not hold Jesus in high esteem? Jesus’ model helps Christians and Muslims alike consider the nature of God and what religious devotion looks like in practice. He didn’t merely tell people to love God and their neighbor; his teachings and healings expressed this love in action.

Who is Jesus, exactly? Our answer depends on more than just our respect for how Jesus lived. It depends largely on who we understand God to be.

It’s important to remember that Christians don’t believe Jesus is the Son of God or the one in whom “the whole fullness of deity dwells” (Colossians 2:9) *because* he lived a praiseworthy and gracious life. The Christian claim that Jesus is fully human and fully divine is based on a variety of biblical texts and reflections on things like God’s willingness to express humility and obedience (seen in passages such as Philippians 2:5–11).

For Christians, for whom Jesus Christ constitutes the core of faith, God is one who can be crucified. In fact, God is willingly crucified by human resistance, as a means of expressing mercy, solidarity, and humility. God experiences apparent defeat by experiencing death in all its horror, so that God might finally show power over death.

So we don't too quickly forget how wild, scandalous, and unobvious these assertions can sound, we Christians should pause frequently to consider why Muslims resist them.

Most Muslim teaching puts great focus on divine *transcendence*—God's utter holiness, separateness, and incomprehensibility. God, virtually by definition, must be beyond what we mortals can know or grasp. God, being the one and only God, must have power over all other powers. Christians believe the same, of course, but we also believe that, in Jesus Christ, God becomes immanent—present and accessible.

And, when this Jesus is crucified, God's immanence also means fragility.

To call Jesus "'Emmanuel,' which means 'God is with us'" (Matthew 1:23), is an astonishing claim. It always has been so. It's even more astonishing when we consider how Jesus' life ended. When Muslims reject Jesus' divinity, some of their reasons are rooted in their reverence for God's majesty and otherness. In response, Christians might reflect on how incredible it is that the same God described in Genesis 1 (who speaks creation into being) and Isaiah 6 (the hem of whose massive garment fills the entire temple) chooses to be fully present in the crying, vulnerable baby born in Bethlehem and in the condemned insurgent executed on Golgotha's cross.

II. Discussion Questions

1. What aspect of Jesus' life, ministry, or identity is the most important to you? What aspect do you think makes Jesus most appealing to people?
2. Christian theologians often talk about Jesus Christ as the principal means by which we comprehend God and understand who God is (compare Colossians 1:15–20). What does this mean to you? What questions does it raise for you?
3. Christian pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer once said:
“We have become so accustomed to the idea of divine love and of God's coming at Christmas that we no longer feel the shiver of fear that God's coming should arouse in us.” (Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “The Coming of Jesus in Our Midst,” *Living Pulpit* 6 [1997]: 39)

What was his point? Are there ways in which our popular conceptions of Jesus have made us take too lightly the awe-inspiring character of a transcendent, holy God?

4. Muslim scholar M. A. Merad has written:
“In the Qur'ān everything is aimed at convincing the believer that he will experience victory over the forces of evil. Islam refuses to accept this tragic image of the Passion, not simply because it has no place for the dogma of redemption but because the Passion would imply in its eyes that God had failed.” (M. A. Merad, “Christ according to the Qur'ān,” *Encounter* [1980]: 69, quoted in Mona Siddiqui, *Christians, Muslims, and Jesus* [Yale University Press, 2013], 227)

What's commendable about the Muslim perspective that Merad describes? What's important about believing that God has no equal, that nothing in the universe can rival God's power, and that God cannot be overcome by evil?