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# JESUS OF NAZARETH:

## A SCRIPTURAL THEME TO PROMOTE MUSLIM-CHRISTIAN DIALOGUE

*Muhib. O. Opeloye*

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### Introduction

JESUS (THE QUR'ANIC "ISA") is perhaps the most controversial of all the world religious figures. The controversy surrounding his personality has been largely responsible for the dividing line between Islam and Christianity as two separate religions. Jesus is to the Christians the expected Messiah whom some Jews denied and the Romans killed. He is to them the son of God and God Incarnate. To the Muslims he was no more than a prophet, a prophet sent to the children of Israel. This notwithstanding, the Qur'an is replete with views corroborating the Biblical account of Jesus. It is the aim of this paper to highlight the extent to which the Qur'anic views on Jesus are complementary to those of the Bible with a view to using them as a basis to promote Muslim-Christian dialogue.

The subject would be examined under four subheadings: concord in the Qur'anic and Biblical views of Jesus; narratives about Jesus

peculiar to the Qur'an; areas of conflict in the Qur'anic and Biblical views and the Qur'anic salvation scheme for the Christians.

### Concord in the Qur'anic and Biblical Accounts of Jesus

The Qur'an, unlike the Bible, does not contain a detailed account of Jesus' life. We are informed of how he was born, given an account of his prophetic mission, and a refutation of his divine nature and crucifixion. The first area of concord in the two scriptures' perception of Jesus is noticed in his birth account.

Surah 3: 45-47 of the Qur'an gives its account thus:

Behold! the angels said: "O Mary! God gives thee glad tidings of a word from him: his name will be Christ Jesus, the son of Mary, held in honour in this world and the hereafter and of (the company of) those nearest to God." 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 wills. When He has decreed a plan He says to it, 'be' and it is." (cf. Surah 19: 16-22)

This Qur'anic passage compares to some extent with the information contained in Lk. 1:26 - Lk. 2:7 and Mt. 1:18-25. The two scriptures agree on the miraculous birth of Jesus. They are both of the view that the conception of Jesus took place immediately after the angelic announcement without Mary (the Qur'anic Maryam) having any sexual dealing with a man. The exclamation "How can this be for I am still a virgin" recorded in Luke 1:34 re-echos in Surahs 3:47 and 19:20.

The authenticity of the virgin birth narrative cannot be undermined simply because the records are missing in the other New Testament books apart from Luke and Matthew, as E. T. Tinsley would want us to believe.<sup>1</sup>

In view of the charges levied against Mary by some Jews in consequence of her unnatural conception, the Qur'an sees the need to exonerate her with the reasoned arguments proceeding the birth narrative starting from Surah 3:33.

As a proof of her chastity, she is presented as a holy woman dedicated to God in conception and at birth. (Surah 3: 35-36) She was to grow in purity and beauty in the care of Zacharias. (Surah 3:37) Moreover, the story of Zacharias (the Qur'anic Zakariya) is related in Surah 3:38 to show that the power of God exercised in giving him and

his barren wife John (Qur'anic Yahya) in their old age was still at work in the miraculous conception of Mary. The Qur'an would have no need of making reference to this if Jesus had been born the natural way.

The next area of concord is similarity in the Qur'anic and Biblical views on Jesus' employment of miracles to assert his authority in the course of his ministry. As we read in the Bible, the Qur'an informs us that Jesus was given the power to heal the sick, bring life to the dead, restore the sight of the blind and heal the leper. (Surah 3:49) According to Surah 5:113 he was able to do these because he was strengthened by God with a holy spirit. These miracles, as far as the Qur'an is concerned, were meant to convince the Israelites that Jesus' mission was divinely inspired.

Thirdly, despite the Qur'anic denial of Jesus' crucifixion on the cross, the scripture agrees with the Bible on his ascension into heaven as evident in Surah 4:158, which declares:

Nay, God raised him up unto Himself and God is exalted in power, wise. (cf. Surahs 3:55 and 5:120)

The ascension passages, Surahs 3:55; 4:158 and 5:120 as understood by commentators like Abul A'la Maududi and Yusuf Ali, hold that Jesus still lives in the body in heaven.<sup>2</sup> The other view, which appears to us less plausible, is the view held by commentators like M. M. Ali, asserting that Jesus did die but not when he was supposed to be crucified and that his being raised up unto God only meant his being exalted and honored by God.<sup>3</sup> If the Christians' belief in Jesus' ascension had been baseless, it would have been refuted by the Qur'an point blank, just as it refutes some Christians doctrines.

Fourth is the common belief of the two scriptures in the second coming of Jesus. This view derives from Surah 4:159, which reads:

And there is none of the people of the Book but must believe in him before his death; and on the day of Judgement He will be a witness against them.

Again, there is difference of opinion in the interpretation of the passage. Those who hold the view that Jesus did not die but lives in bodily form with God interpret the passage to mean that all the people of the book alive at the time of his second coming will eventually believe in him before his natural death.<sup>4</sup> Those who hold the view that

Jesus did die would rather assert that the pronoun "his" in the passage is in reference to the people of the book and not Jesus, arguing that the emphatic expression "must believe" denotes more a question of duty than of fact.<sup>5</sup> M. M. Ali<sup>6</sup> is of this school of thought and it is a less popular view.

It must be emphasized that the complementary teachings of the Qur'an and Bible on these important aspects of Jesus' life are to my mind an index of the common origin of the two scriptures.

### Narratives about Jesus Peculiar to the Qur'an

The Qur'anic narrative that Jesus talked as a baby in the cradle is one of his miracles peculiar to the Qur'an. Verses 22-26 of Surah *Maryam* contains the accounts of Mary's conception, her withdrawal to a distant place, her painful experience at childbirth and the coming to her aid of an angel. In verses 27-28 we are informed that after delivery, she brought the baby to her people who accused her of unchastity, having brought forth a baby without marital attachment.

In response to this, Mary simply pointed at the infant, asking them to direct their questions to him. Their reply was: "How shall we talk with him who is an infant in the cradle?" (S.19:29) There and then the child spoke out, saying:

I am indeed a servant of God. He has given me revelation and made me a prophet. He has made me blessed wheresoever I be and has enjoined on me prayer and chastity as long as I live. He has made me kind to my mother and He has not made me oppressive and hard-hearted. So peace be upon me on the day I was born and peace shall be on me on the day I am raised to life. (Surah 19:30-33, cf. Surah 3:46 and 5:110)

Jesus made this statement to rescue his helpless mother whose explanation could not be accepted in view of the people's censorious mood. The statement forms a summary of Jesus' mission.

What we have in the Bible that is close to this experience is Luke's account of Jesus' disputation with the teachers in the temple at the age of twelve. (Luke 2:46)

According to Luke's gospel, Jesus as a child was strong in spirit and was filled with wisdom. (Luke 2:40) Besides, some apocryphal gospels describe him as preaching from infancy.

The miracle of the clay bird contained in Surahs 3:49 and 5:113 is not found in the New Testament even though some apocryphal books

relate it.<sup>7</sup> In the Qur'anic passage, Jesus is credited with the statement: "I have come to you with a sign from your Lord, in your very presence I make the likeness of a bird out of clay and breathe into it and it becomes by God's command a bird." Perhaps it is more appropriate to see this passage as a parable rather than as a statement of truth considering the fact that Jesus' dignity is much above such action as making toy birds. Moreover, the act of creation (*Khalq*) is God's prerogative.<sup>8</sup>

### Conflicts in the Qur'anic and Biblical View about Jesus

Three principal areas of conflict are worthy of consideration, namely: Jesus' Godhead, Jesus' sonship and Jesus' crucifixion. The Qur'an is unequivocal in its rejection of the Christian belief that Jesus is God. Surah 5: 72-73 declares in this regard:

They do blaspheme who say "Allah is Christ the son of Mary." But said Christ: "O children of Israel worship God my Lord and your Lord." Whoever joins other gods with Allah, God will forbid him the Garden and Fire will be his abode. . . They do blaspheme who say Allah is one of three in Trinity, for there is no god except one God.

Three principal reasons have been identified as being responsible for the prevalence of this belief in Jesus' divinity: the miraculous birth of Jesus, his concrete miracles, and his ascension into the heavens. Though the Qur'an confirms the three, it does not see in any of them reason to justify deification of Jesus. As for the first reason, the Qur'an makes it plain that the birth of Jesus without a father was only a manifestation of the infinite power of God who can create anybody in whatever manner He wills. This is why the scripture in Surah 3:59 compares the birth of Jesus to the creation of Adam. By so doing it tries to call attention of believers to the more miraculous manner by which Adam was brought to being.

With regard to the second reason, the Qur'an makes it clear that Jesus performed all his miracles through God's permission and not as an independent authority. And lastly, with regard to his ascension, the Qur'anic view is that he was recalled by the one who sent him only when his life was to be terminated without any just cause, and it was to that Being he directed his cry: "My God, my God why hast thou forsaken me?" recorded in Mark 15:34.

Also in Surah 9:30 we find the denunciation of the belief in the sonship of Jesus. The Muslims would argue that since the miraculous birth of John the Baptist (the Qur'anic Yahya) did not make him the son of God, so Jesus' miraculous birth could not make him the son of God. It is in recognition of the miracle that surrounded the birth of the two of them that they have been mentioned together in the same context in the gospel of Luke.

In Surah 4:157, the crucifixion of Jesus is emphatically refuted as we read:

That they said (in boast) "We killed Christ Jesus the son of Mary, the apostle of God." 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 surely they killed him not.

In the belief of the Muslims, God did not allow the fulfillment of the sinister plan to kill Jesus. According to Muslims, another person who was made to put on the appearance of Jesus was killed in his stead.<sup>9</sup> The rejection of the crucifixion doctrine is a logical consequence of Muslim's disbelief in the doctrines of original sin and its atonement with the blood of Jesus.

As far as the Muslims are concerned, Jesus was a prophet of God sent to the children of Israel. (Surah 3:49) According to Surah 4:171, he was God's word bestowed on Mary and a spirit proceeding from Him. This passage thus reveals another aspect of striking similarity in the Biblical and Qur'anic perception of Jesus which is the fact that he is God's "word" even though their interpretation differs. The Qur'anic presentation of Jesus as prophet is corroborated by Hebrews 3:1-3, which reads:

Therefore holy brethren who share in a heavenly call, consider Jesus the apostle and high priest of our confession. He was faithful to Him who appointed him, just as Moses was faithful in God's house.

Apart from Jesus being referred to as apostle or prophet in this quotation, he is also compared with Moses who is generally acknowledged to be a prophet. The quotation asserts that Moses was faithful to God, thus demonstrating one of the traits of the prophets. What should interest any lover of dialogue among the Muslims and Christians is that in spite of the differences already identified, as fundamental

as some of them are, the Qur'an does not exclude either Muslims or Christians from the people who may see salvation. This is the subject examined in the next section.

### The Qur'anic Salvation Scheme for the Christians

Christians are included among the groups promised salvation, as evident in Surah 2:62 of the Qur'an. That that salvation does not depend on the special relation of any particular people with God is most explicit in the following passage as it declares:

Those who believe in the Qur'an and those who follow the Jewish (scriptures) and the Christians and the Sabians, any who believe in God and the last day and work righteousness shall have the reward with their Lord, on them shall be no fear nor shall they grieve. (cf. Surah 5:72)

The requirements for salvation according to this passage are right belief and good deeds. One may then ask the question, what constitutes right belief?

This is the belief in and submission to one God without attributing to Him any associate, as enjoined in Deuteronomy 6:4 (cf. Exodus 20:3), Mark 12:29 and Surah 112:1-4. The issue of right belief is not irrelevant because even within each tradition there are groupings. For instance, among the Christians there are divisions between the "born again" and the "born once" just as among Muslims we have the "orthodox" and the "unorthodox" groups. Naturally, each of these groups would see itself as having the right belief. Whoever falls into wrong belief, whether he be Muslim or Christian, would be denied salvation.

It is in consequence of salvation promised the Christians that God in Surah 3:55 assures Jesus that his followers would be made superior to those who reject faith. It is interesting to note that some Christians in interpreting this passage have come up with the conjecture that Christians have a better claim to salvation than the Muslims. This is a wrong interpretation because Muslims neither reject faith nor reject Jesus. The people to whom reference is being made in the passage were the people who witnessed the mission of Jesus. It would be right, therefore, to say that Muslims are good Christians in view of their belief in Jesus, and Islam has incorporated Christianity within it because of its doctrine of progressive revelation.

Notwithstanding the Qur'anic criticisms of the Christians, Islam

still identifies Christianity as a branch of the Abrahamic faith.<sup>10</sup> This is why Surah 29:46 declares:

Say we (Muslims) believe in that which was revealed to us as well as that which was revealed to you. Our God and your God is one and the same we all submit to. (cf. Surah 2:136)

If the Qur'an identifies Christianity with Islam, it is because the scriptures see mankind as one community of faith which later broke into sects. Surah 25:52-53 testifies to this as it reads:

And verily this brotherhood of yours is a single brotherhood and I am your Lord and cherisher, therefore fear me. But people have cut off their affair (of unity) between them into sects, each party rejoicing in that which is itself.

Even when the single community has broken into factions and each faction sees itself as the chosen or the beloved of God, there are guidelines in the scriptures to promote harmonious relations between the different factions.<sup>11</sup>

Besides, the scriptures would like us to exercise caution against condemning one another. This is the message of Paul in Romans 11:11-36 for the Gentile Christians, i.e., the message against an attitude of conceit. A similar message can be derived from Surah 4:123-124 which makes it clear that God cannot be influenced by our judgement of the others in passing His own judgement. This becomes clearer when we notice that in spite of the Qur'anic criticism against some Christians doctrines, Jesus in his pleading (see Surah 5:121) left the decision to God in deciding the affairs of his people.

Allah could use His discretion to forgive or punish them. The Muslims too are not exempted from this discretionary use of God's power. It is a power that He exercises as He wishes in spite of the assertion in Surah 3:49 that Islam is the only religion acceptable to Allah. The lesson for us as Muslims and Christians is that we should learn not to judge others.

### Conclusion

The thesis of this study is that in spite of the fundamental differences in the Qur'anic and Biblical conception of Jesus/Isa, there are striking similarities in the two scriptures' views about him which serve as an index of common origin of the two. This being the case.

there must be mutual acceptance of the legitimacy of one another's religion. To my mind, such a mutual acceptance is *sine qua non* to any meaningful dialogue between the Muslims and the Christians. As is evident in the foregoing, the Islamic identification with Christianity is not in doubt, but a similar recognition is not accorded to Islam by Christianity.

This is what Krister Stendahl, the former Harvard Divinity School Dean, decries when he accuses the Christian of presenting the New Testament as being superior to the Old Testament without granting Islam the logical status of being even newer.<sup>12</sup> Many Muslim scholars, including Ahmad Deedat<sup>13</sup> and Abdul Ahad Dawud<sup>14</sup> in their researches into the Bible have tried to identify passages of the scripture which might be interpreted as making allusion to Islam or Muhammad. This is part of an attempt to establish Biblical sanction for the legitimacy of Islam. Their search for such passages must have been motivated by such Qur'anic passages as Surah 61:6 in which Jesus is presented as foretelling the coming of Muhammad.

While it is not for us to prove or disprove the veracity of the Biblical passages cited as lending credence to the legitimacy of Islam, one is constrained to call attention to the indisputable common root of Islam and Christianity, which was Abraham. The divine promise made to the great patriarch to make great nations out of his offspring does not exclude Ishmael, as evident in Genesis 21, verses 13 and 18. The greatness of the Ishmaelite's descendants (the Arabs) does not rest on anything other than Islam. It follows, therefore, that Islam and Christianity as branches of Abrahamic faith are both legitimate, and they should recognize one another as such and leave judgment on the salvation of the adherents of the two traditions to God the Almighty.

### NOTES

1. E.T. Tinsley, *The Cambridge Bible Commentary: The Gospel According to Luke* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 30.
2. Abul A'la Maududi, *The Meaning of the Qur'an*, Vol. 1 (Delhi: Board of Islamic Publications), p. 243.
3. See M.M. Ali's Commentary on Surah 3:54 on p. 147 and his Translation of Surah 4:158 and Surah 5:117.
4. See Abul A'la Maududi (Vol. 1) and Yusuf Ali's interpretation of Surah 4:159.
5. Abdullah Yusuf Ali, *The Holy Qur'an, Text Translation and Commentary* (Brentwood: Amama Corporation, 1989), p. 231.
6. To appreciate the difference of opinion in the interpretation of the passage it

- may be useful to compare Abdullah Yusuf Ali's translation and that of Maulana Muhammed Ali. The former's translation of Surah 4:159 reads: "And there is none of the people of the book but must believe in him before his death." The latter's translation reads: "And there is none of the people of the book but will believe in this revelation before his death. . ."
7. Abdullah Yusuf Ali, *op. cit.*, p. 135.
  8. M.M. Ali, *The Holy Qur'an, Text translation and Commentary*, 5th Edition (Lahore: The Ahmadiyyah Anjuman Isha'at Islam, 1963), p. 144.
  9. Sayyid Qutb, *Fi Zilal al-Qur'an*, Vol. 2 (Dar ihya' at-Turath al-Arabi Bairat, 1967), p. 588.
  10. Muhammed Abdul al-Rauf, "Judaism and Christianity in the Perspective of Islam," in Ismail Raji al-Faruqi (ed.), *Triologue of the Abrahamic Faiths* (Riyadh: International Islamic Publishing House, 1991), p. 27.
  11. M.O. Opeloye, "Guidelines in the Qur'an on Interreligious Relations: An Overview," in J.K. Olupona (ed.), *Religion and Peace in Multifaith Nigeria* (Ile-Ife: Obafemi Awolowo University Press, 1992), p. 82.
  12. Krister Stendahl, "Judaism and Islam in the Perspective of Christianity," in Ismail Raji al-Faruqi, *op. cit.*, p. 20.
  13. Ahmed Deedat, *What the Bible Says about Muhammed* (Nairobi: Lino Publishers, n.d.), p. 4.
  14. Abdul Ahmad Dawud, *Muhammad in the Bible* (Kuala Lumpur: Pustaka Ankara, 1969), pp. 11ff.