



Finding and Following Jesus: The Muslim Claim to the Messiah

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I. Jesus عليه السلام and the House of Abraham Divided

Christians do not care much when Muslims tell them that the prophets of the Old Testament (Hebrew Bible) are also prophets of Islam. They care a great deal when they find out that Jesus عليه السلام, their special savior, is a revered prophet in the Qur'an. Many Christian converts to Islam claim that they have kept the best moral qualities of the Christian Jesus, popular with Sufis as the prophet of peace, grace, love and self-denial, while augmenting and reinforcing these with the example of the last and greatest of God's messengers, our Prophet Muhammad صلى الله عليه وسلم. Only Islam made them feel complete as believers. They describe it as the most natural conclusion to their journeys.

Some Muslims sport slogans such as 'I love Jesus and follow him because I am a Muslim. And he was too!' Or: 'Every Friday is Good Friday.' Christians feel offended by: 'You have the Cross—but we have Jesus.' Some are angered enough to cite with approval the 'insider movement': if you look for Jesus in the Qur'an, you will eventually find that he points to the Christ of the New Testament. If you really look for Allah, you shall find instead the divine Jesus! Some Muslims who choose to follow Christ claim that, in retrospect, they see the Islamic view of Jesus عليه السلام as being a parody and a caricature of orthodox Christian convictions about his nature and person.

Two can play such games of dispossessing the rival—and with fatal consequences, daily, globally. Our concern is not polemical point-scoring nor combat and controversy but rather sincere zealousness for the truth. Can Muslims be loyal and sincere followers of Jesus Christ عليه السلام? Can they be loyal to the message of Jesus—without becoming Christians? Some Christians might reply: that is the only way to be loyal to the real Jesus!

Can a Muslim commit to Christ—become a conscientious follower of Jesus of Nazareth, seal of the prophets of Israel? This question does not arise comparably

for Jews, never as a part of their faith. Messianic Jews are seen, by other Jews, as being Jews only in name and therefore, in effect, Christians. Many joke that they are only ‘jew-ish’, not Jews! Some modern Jews do, however, want to reclaim and rehabilitate Jesus the Jew as a wise preacher who was misunderstood by his own tribe—both by his Pharisaic enemies and his Christian followers. Again, some prominent Hindus such as Mahatma Gandhi, fighting British imperialism, chose to honor Jesus of Nazareth as an advocate of pacifism in the context of the brutality of the Roman empire. Hinduism does not require any such position. Anyone, religious or secular, may opt to endorse the moral wisdom of Jesus’ teachings.

It is not optional for Muslims since they are in some sense insiders with respect to Christianity as their faith requires them to believe in Jesus عليه السلام. The Muslim perspective on Jesus is unique. Muslims claim, on the authority of the Qur’an and the Prophet’s authentic sayings, that theirs is the only fully correct theological view of Jesus’ miraculous origins, true identity, nature, teachings, and ministry. This claim is proffered to rival the one found in the New Testament and in subsequent Christian dogmatic tradition. Just as Christians tell Jews that they have rejected and misunderstood Jesus Christ, Muslims tell Christians that they too have rejected and misunderstood the real Jesus in favor of their own invented doctrines about his true nature and real message. The person of Jesus is both divisive and also decisive for relations among the Abrahamic cousins, especially between the two global superpowers of faith, Christianity and Islam.

Did Jesus عليه السلام intend to divide the House of Abraham? Did the last Prophet صلى الله عليه وسلم successfully unite that family? Even what is in common need not unite, in the Abrahamic family any more than in any human family. Tragically, people often fight those with whom they share the most.

The Qur’an’s Jesus عليه السلام was a prophet-teacher, honored by commentators as one of the five senior messengers of God, ‘the group of firm resolve’ (Qur’an 46:35), said to include the chief champions of monotheism, prophets such as Abraham and Moses عليهما السلام. Indeed, all of these prophets supply excellent exemplars for conduct—and the Qur’an singles out Abraham عليه السلام as being, like

the Prophet Muhammad صلى الله عليه وسلم, a role model for all believers (Qur'an 60:4, 33:21). Christians claim that the earthly Jesus عليه السلام reflected the power, presence, and purpose of God the Father. Muslims proclaim that Muhammad صلى الله عليه وسلم, as God's last prophetic representative, also reflected divine power, presence (in a different sense), and purpose without being God incarnate.

After we introduce the problem of Jesus' identity in the next section, we deepen and broaden our inquiry, in sections III and IV, to provide a scriptural account of his life and ministry. In sections V and VI, we examine two practical areas of disagreement about Jesus' mission and role in history. In an interlude in section VII we note the emergence of an apparently permanent dogmatic deadlock about his alleged divinity. The rest of the essay attempts to resolve or avoid this ancient stalemate about Jesus' nature and significance in sacred history. We examine in section VIII his self-image in order to break the stalemate. In the penultimate section, we locate an interim ethical consensus that would enable us all to vie with one another in good works (Qur'an 2:148) while deferring to the next world the resolution of dogmatic deadlocks. This shared practical moral ground for achieving the common good has ambiguous potential: what is held in common can unite as well as divide. Think of family rivalries. In the final section, I note the implications of this inquiry and set some tasks for the future. I conclude that Muslims may, optionally, follow the example of Jesus Christ عليه السلام, one of God's senior prophets, a teacher 'full of grace and truth' (John 1:14).

II. A Great Prophetic Leader—or the Lord of the Worlds?

Some men have been named for the very quality that entitled them to lead and guide others: their second name is a title that resembles a proper name. Examples include Gautama Buddha (Enlightened One), Jesus Christ (Messiah), and Muhammad *Rasul Allah* (Messenger of God). The title can precede the proper name as in Christ Jesus.

Jesus of Nazareth was a Jew from Galilee, in historic Palestine. He lived from about 4 BC to 30 AD according to the calendar dated in his honor. Judaism rejects his claim to be a prophet. He is seen as an apostate from the faith. How did a rejected and suffering messiah become the God of Israel and of the Gentiles? That is the history of the early church in its journey from Nazareth to Nicaea.

Christology is the academic study of Jesus of Nazareth—his status and role in relationship to the one and only God of Israel. Christians debate the problem of Jesus’ true nature as a philosophical (metaphysical) question, similar to perennial conundrums about the nature of mind, matter, spirit, time, space, and free will. Christology is a branch of the analytical philosophy of Christianity. The New Testament is written in Greek, the language of Greek philosophy. Answers to Christological puzzles, however, unlike those given for the other philosophical problems, have serious religious consequences. It is an urgent, rather than merely academic, concern.

The Qur’an claims to retrieve the truth about Jesus عليه السلام by adjusting and correcting and sometimes rejecting his followers’ views of his origins, personal identity and self-image, true spiritual nature, and the earthly or temporal mission that encompassed his words and works; that is, his teachings and miracles. The Qur’an’s verdict is this: the prophet Jesus preached the Torah (juridical monotheism) to his people, the Children of Israel, and they rejected him. The Islamic scripture effectively demythologized Jesus some 1300 years before modern German theologians such as Rudolf Bultmann (d. 1976) and others who sought and found the historical Jesus as he appears in objective biblical scholarship.

In contrast with the nativity narratives found in the Greek New Testament, the Qur’anic Jesus’s first spoken words were, presumably in Aramaic, “I am indeed God’s servant. He gave me the Book and made me a prophet” (Qur’an 19:30). It is as though the newborn could hardly wait to speak the truth about himself—to refute the Christian ‘mythology’ that would eventually be built around his nature and mission. For Christians, this modest (low) Christology fails to do justice to Jesus, the Christ, who inspires their faithful devotion and worship. The same *surah*

(Maryam) announces that “no one comes to the Merciful One (*al-Rahman*) except as a servant” (Qur’an 19:30). God permits no son (or sons) or daughters to become heirs who claim a share in His Sovereignty.

The Qur’an teaches that core Christian dogmas about Jesus’ identity and nature compromise God’s Transcendence and Unity (Qur’an 5:17). The Islamic scripture does not deify any prophet, not even Muhammad ﷺ. The Qur’an never exalts anyone, human or angel, to the status of the One and Only God, Who is Unique, Indivisible, and without rival. Its view of Jesus عليه السلام is modest in comparison with the New Testament’s appraisal which the Qur’an dismisses as zealous excess.

Philosophers of mind debate identity at all levels—primarily personal identity of the private self, the center of stable and self-aware personhood and hence adult moral liability. Once we know a person’s basic identity, we can debate social or political identity in respect of perceived color, creed, community, country, class and culture, listed in order of most innate and intrinsic dimensions. Who then was Jesus عليه السلام, the historical character? Can we study his life and work as we study the life of a general such as Julius Caesar? To follow someone as a leader, we must know their identity and something of their character and message, even class affiliation, in order to assess whether they are worthy of our allegiance.

III. Jesus Christ عليه السلام in Islam

Jesus was “God’s word conveyed to Mary and a spirit from him” (Qur’an 4:171) but he remained only the son of Mary (Qur’an 5:110), not of God. The Qur’an understands literally the notion of a son and therefore rejects a consort for God (Qur’an 6:101; 72:3) who has no son, only honored servants (Qur’an 21:26). There are no saviors, only prophets who warn. Nor are there any intercessors—unless God wills otherwise. He alone has the power to forgive sins and to answer His creatures’ prayers for help and guidance.

In the Qur'an, 'Isa ibn Maryam is the only prophet whose maternity is part of his routine identification. The Arabian Prophet is called by his fuller name of 'Muhammad ibn Abdullah' only in the *hadith* and other Arabic literature, to highlight his lineage. Jesus عليه السلام is an Anglicized form of the Greek *Yesous*; it transliterates the Hebrew *Yeshu'a*, rendered 'Joshua' in English. The Hebrew original contains the idea of being a savior. 'Isa has no meaning in Arabic or in Hebrew and its use might startle Christians since they expect *Yeshu'a* or *Yesu'a* to be the relevant Arabic transliteration.

God made Jesus and his mother عليهما السلام (jointly) a sign (Qur'an 23:50)—from (or of) God. 'Isa ibn Maryam is a sign (*ayah*) for humanity, a mercy (*rahmah*) from God, his miraculous birth “a matter foreordained” (Qur'an 19:21). Muslims proclaim Jesus as a sign of God (*ayatu Allah*) for all humanity (Qur'an 19:21) but not a (or the) son of God. The Qur'an also calls Muhammad صلى الله عليه وسلم a *rahmah* to all the worlds (21:107) and eulogizes the Word of God as a mercy and healing for believers (17:82; 41:44).

The Greek *Christos* (anointed one) is a translation of the Hebrew *meshiakh*, meaning someone selected for a sacred role or special honor. It can refer to any chosen or regal personage. *Al-Masih* is probably an Arabic transliteration of the Hebrew. But what does *al-Masih* mean or intend in the Qur'an? The Arabic verb *ma/sa/ha*, like its virtually identical Hebrew cognate, means to rub lightly with water or oil; formal washings before Muslim ritual prayers require this light touch or anointment with water (Qur'an 5:6).

The Qur'an's description of Jesus عليه السلام is made definite: his messianic title is attached to his factual (biological) maternity: *al-Masih* 'Isa ibn Maryam (3:45). In Judaism, 'the Christ' functions as an indefinite description since the identity of the true claimant must be distinguished from false pretenders. The referent of the phrase remains disputed: Jews are still waiting for the messiah. In first-century Palestine, the messiah's lineage and identity were topics of fierce sectarian dispute. The self-segregated Qumran community expected two messiahs, one royal (of Davidic descent) and one priestly.

In prophecy, an indefinite description is made partly definite; a proper name may or may not supplement the title. Thus, “His name is Ahmad” (Qur’an 61:6) can function as an attributive adjectival appellation or merely a proper (nominal or content-less) name while “His name is John” (*Yahya*; Qur’an 19:7) simply introduces a proper name.

The Qur’an denies the crucifixion (4:157), a fact that further defines the Messiah. God would not permit such a one to die a shameful death. In later Muslim piety, Jesus عليه السلام, as the seal of the saints (friends of God) was considered too important a figure for God to allow his martyrdom by sinners, although prophets had been killed by their communities before (Qur’an 2:61; 4:155). The Qur’an implies a substitute (or surrogate or illusory) crucifixion: perhaps a loving disciple took Jesus’ place much as Ali رضي الله تعالى عنه, destined to be the fourth caliph, was willing to die to save the Prophet’s life during an assassination attempt in Mecca.

Jesus عليه السلام was ‘translated,’ a technical Christian term for describing ascent into heaven, without the normal precondition of bodily death. Allah exalted Jesus to himself. The Qur’an’s denial of Jesus’ crucifixion obviates the need for his resurrection but the Islamic scripture attests to Jesus’ ascension, understood as his miraculous entry into heaven through God’s direct intervention (see Qur’an 3:55; 4:157-8; 5:116-117). Only Luke mentions the Ascension of the risen Christ (24:50-51) after his resurrection and adds in Acts (1:1-3) that this event took place forty days after his resurrection. (Mark 16:19 mentions it too but this passage is absent from the most reliable early manuscripts and other ancient witnesses.)

IV. The New Testament Jesus عليه السلام in the Light of the Qur’an

The New Testament writers considered Jesus عليه السلام to be the messianic

descendant of King David عليه السلام. For Christians, Jesus' humiliating death was simply a fulfillment of divine prophecy: he was innocent of the accusations made against him by the establishment. While claiming that Muhammad's advent was promised in antecedent scripture, the Qur'an never calls Jesus the promised messiah. This may be because the Qur'an recognizes at best only the Torah (Pentateuch of Moses) as scripture. For Jews, the Masoretic text of the Hebrew Bible, what Christians effectively dismiss as the 'Old' Testament, has three levels of holiness. After the Torah, the prophetic oracles quoting direct divine speech form the second holiest portion, the *Nebi'im* (Prophets) division. The messianic prophecies are concentrated here but, as in the third portion, the *Ketub'im* (Writings), much of this prophetic material is humanly composed and has been partly corrupted in transmission and through unauthorized scribal amplification.

The four canonical gospels, the Synoptic trio, and John, give us an idea of why Jesus عليه السلام himself eventually became an object of worship even though he, according to the Qur'an's unified and homogeneous account of his life, invited his people to God as the sole object of deserved worship.

The author of Mark, the earliest gospel, portrays Jesus عليه السلام as God's loyal servant, a status attested miraculously. 'The Son of God' (Mark 15:39) need not have been intended to refer to Jesus' alleged divinity but rather to his close spiritual relationship with God. Jesus is one of the prophets and Peter adds that he is the Christ (Mark 8:28-29). For Christians, being Christ lifts Jesus beyond the status of prophet. Once all God's messengers have been rejected by their sinful communities, the climax is not yet another prophet, no matter how great, but rather the novel initiatives of the divine son and the divine Incarnation, 'God with us,' who brings in person rather than sends through his deputies. It is a love that suffers unjustly but willingly to redeem the unjust.

Matthew's gospel links Abraham to Jesus, via David عليهم السلام, in a genealogy (1:1-6). This first evangelist, the so-called teacher whose gospel opens the New Testament canon, implies a paternal genealogy when he concludes by mentioning Joseph but does not call him Jesus' father but rather "the husband of Mary" (1:16).

Jesus as the son of Joseph is here understood metaphorically, not literally. In Christian creeds, however, Jesus as the son of God is taken literally, not metaphorically—although admittedly not physically. For Muslims, Adam and Jesus عليه السلام resemble each other in terms of creation (Qur'an 3:59). Both are without human antecedents: no paternity (Jesus) and neither maternity nor paternity (Adam).

Consistently for a virgin birth, the Qur'an, unlike the New Testament, does not mention Jesus' paternal genealogy (or any full siblings) but affirms a delimited maternal genealogy by regularly calling him 'Isa ibn Maryam. In the New Testament, Jesus عليه السلام is called the son of Mary only in Mark 6:3. His father's profession (see Matt. 13:55) is mentioned by his opponents determined to cut him down to size and put him in his place. Muslims are not of course in the same camp as these enemies of Christ who were motivated by malice and hostility. Rather, Muslims want to rescue the true Jesus from the clutches of false doctrine about his nature. Some Christians see the Qur'an as degrading Jesus, especially in the hypothetical divine threat to annihilate the Christ, his mother, and all creation altogether (Qur'an 5:17). The Qur'an's chief concern, however, is the relentless defense of God's utter uniqueness and total monopoly on the sovereignty of His Kingdom.

Matthew's Jesus عليه السلام was a new lawgiver—and one greater than Moses عليه السلام. The Qur'an, however, presents Jesus simply as a law-giver who brings the Gospel (*al-Injil*) to confirm the Torah (*al-Taurah*). The Qur'an reveals that the Gospel vouchsafed to Jesus was a relaxed version of the Torah (Qur'an 3:50). Some laws imposed on the Children of Israel seemed prejudicially rigorous but, the Qur'an explains, these laws were intended to be conspicuously rigorous—as a just punishment for their specific iniquities and persistent delinquencies (Qur'an 6:146). However, the Qur'an does not suggest that the Gospel was a law-free version of the Torah or in some way legally or morally superior to it.

The Qur'an concurs with the sum verdict of Matthew's gospel: Jesus عليه السلام was caused to 'fail' in his overall mission to the Children of Israel owing to the latter's

rejection of him. He sensed their disbelief but was cheered up by a small group of believers among them (Qur'an 3:52).

Luke's gospel portrays Jesus عليه السلام as an itinerant teacher of Torah and wisdom, a rejected Jewish prophet with nowhere to lay his head, an image popular, incidentally, with itinerant Sufi mystics. Jesus is awarded many Jewish titles that are acceptable to Muslims. The Qur'an rejects any relationship to God that would move someone beyond that of an honored servant (see Qur'an 43:59), no matter how close a spiritual relationship is otherwise claimed for him. Luke sees Christ primarily as a servant. This is implied by his citation from the Old Testament Book of Isaiah (Chapter 53), the locus of the servant traditions inherited by Christianity from its Jewish origins.

According to John, the fourth evangelist, the spiritual intimacy and unanimity of will which Jesus عليه السلام enjoyed with his *Abba* (heavenly Father) scandalized his Pharisee critics. The Jesus of the Qur'an enjoys a close relationship with God, despite not addressing him as Father. So long as the believer does not obliterate his or her identity but remains distinct from God, Islam salutes the closeness of such mystical piety.

The Qur'an speaks of the signs of God in nature and human nature (3:190; 30:20-25). John's gospel, too, sees the actions of Jesus عليه السلام, the merciful healer, as signs of his divinely supported mission. He is sent by God the Father. "An apostle is not greater," declares Jesus, "than the One who sent him" (John 13:16). This provides a sound biblical basis for the confident Qur'anic claim that Jesus was essentially no more than a messenger of God.

V. Comparing competing scopes of mission

Jesus, the Good Shepherd, dismisses as robbers and usurpers the shepherds who came before him (John 10:8). Muslims would be shocked to read that a prophet of

God rejected previous prophets but Jesus عليه السلام was probably attacking only his usual target, the Pharisees, as hypocritical leaders of their flock. Almost all Biblical scholars agree that for some three decades after Jesus' demise, Christianity remained a Jewish sect. Christians were tolerated within the synagogue. This would have been impossible if Jesus' followers had openly proclaimed his divinity.

To which people(s) was Jesus عليه السلام sent? Matthew's gospel opens with nativity themes: the visit of the (non-Jewish) Magi (2:1-12) from the East followed by a reference to the Galilee of the Gentiles where a light has now shined (4:15-16). The adult Jesus' encounter with a Gentile woman (15:21-28) occasions his explicit disavowal of Gentiles: he says that he has been sent only to save the lost sheep of the House of Israel (15:24). Table fellowship with Gentiles was forbidden to Jews since Jews observed strict dietary restrictions. Indeed all contact with Gentiles was seen as polluting.

The great evangelical commission to convert the whole world (Matt. 28:16-20) contains the teaching only of the post-resurrection Jesus who suddenly preaches the urgent need to reach Jews and Gentiles alike. As many commentators have noted, this part of Matthew is an afterthought, a postscript to the teachings of the very Jewish earthly Jesus عليه السلام whose contacts with Gentiles were random. He explicitly stated his virtual indifference to Gentile salvation although Christians have subsequently read a coded reference to the conversion of all Gentiles, including Muslims, often in stray comments such as his claim that he has sheep in other folds or when he catches abundant fish to feed the disciples after his resurrection.

Matthew has Jesus predict that Israel will reject him and adds that the fruits of God's reign will be inherited by a new people (21:42-43), namely, Matthew's Christian community. The Qur'an affirms the tension between Jesus and his community. A group of Jews believes while another group disbelieves; God empowers the believers (Qur'an 3:52-3; 61:14). Muslims see Muhammad's community as the true inheritors of Jesus عليه السلام and indeed of the House of Abraham عليه السلام.

The Qur'an affirms that Jesus عليه السلام was sent solely to the Children of Israel (3:49). The Prophet's traditions confirm that only the Prophet Muhammad's mission was intended to be universal. Despite being a sign to the world, Jesus was sent as a prophetic leader only to his own people. Several parables told by the New Testament Jesus imply that he was the last prophet (for example, Mark 12:1-12). Muslims claim this terminal honor for Muhammad, the Seal of the Prophets صلى الله عليه وسلم (Qur'an 33:40).

VI. Competing views about the end of history

Many devout Christians believe that Jesus عليه السلام will return to judge the world (Rom. 2:16; 2 Cor. 5:10)—to mark the total triumph of his redemptive mission (1 Cor. 4:5; Phil. 3:20; 1 Thess. 4:13-17). Righteous and wicked alike will be resurrected but only the former shall receive deliverance from their sins and then be glorified. As for the wicked, after the reunion of their souls with their bodies, they shall suffer eternal death.

The debate about Jesus عليه السلام in the last days plays into the current confused and hostile political eschatology which openly informed American foreign policy under George W. Bush. General Jesus would lead the Battle of Armageddon. A small but powerful clique of neo-cons and others have continued to form the far right Christian Zionist component of the American political and public classes under subsequent presidents. Many Republicans support the Christian Zionist movement but mainly out of deference to the Israel lobby rather than religious fervor.

Many Christians have, from the mid-seventh century of the Christian era onward, interpreted the rise of Islam as biblical prophecy relating to the two sons of Abraham, the delinquent children of Ishmael versus the rightful heirs of Isaac. They have seen this clash as being especially vital for the end-times. The creation of the state of Israel and the destruction of the Ottoman caliphate jointly meant that

Muslims would become the great enemies of the Jewish people. Christian Zionists, a small but effective lobby, especially in America, claim that Christians must support Israel and oppose Islam since God will defend Israel and bless only those nations that support her. Jesus shall return and lead all nations only after this final deliverance of the remnant of Israel that did not believe during his first coming but will do so after his second.

Jesus' place in the climax of sacred history is alluded to in some enigmatic Qur'anic verses (Qur'an 4:159; 43:61). Muslims do not see Jesus, in his first coming, as the last and apocalyptic prophet. Why? He did not come to announce the imminent termination of history but rather to predict the coming of Muhammad صلى الله عليه وسلم, the last prophet. Once Jesus عليه السلام sensed that his mission would end in worldly defeat, he prophesied the advent of Ahmad (Qur'an 61:6), "the more or most praised one," a comparative (also superlative) form of the adjective *muhammad*. It is used here as a proper name. The Prophet صلى الله عليه وسلم said: "The nearest prophet to me is Jesus." He meant in time rather than in ministry.

According to some authentic *hadith* and other post-Qur'anic sources, Jesus عليه السلام shall return as a leader of an elite entourage of believers. He will fight his opponents and, after some decades of just and peaceful rule, he will terminate secular history and eventually inaugurate the final judgment. According to some Islamic end-times prophecies, when Jesus returns, he will fight the Antichrist, abolish the poll-tax levied on protected Jews and Christians, break the cross that assigned divinity to him, kill a pig as a sign of return to the law that he supposedly abrogated, prohibit alcohol, and follow Muhammad صلى الله عليه وسلم as his imam. Jesus will die—successfully this time. An empty grave is reserved for him, next to the Prophet's tomb in Medina.

VII. Deadlock about Divinity

In the Qur'an and the Prophet's canonical sayings, *al-Masih* is the Lord's anointed, an accolade conferred uniquely on Jesus عليه السلام. Islam pays special tribute to Jesus but not in a way that would satisfy the highly ambitious credal and ecclesial requirements of orthodox Christology. For Christians, the Muslim Jesus is a dull, predictable figure, a mere prophet, of whom there are legion in the Bible and the Qur'an. He would resemble the harmless figure of the cultural Jesus whose message can entertain kids at Christmas and Easter. This may sound like a caricature or parody of the Qur'anic Jesus but the Christian point is that only the adult version is the real Jesus, the incarnate God who suffered on a cross to secure redemption for sinful Adam and all his descendants. The Islamic Jesus appears as the real Jesus but minus the distinctive and unsettling aspects of his life, nature, and mission.

For Muslims, the Christian Jesus is a blasphemer, as he was for Jews too. And the case against the Christian view of Jesus is closed—and closed by God in his final book. Some committed Christians may feel depressed, even utterly desolated, as they read the Qur'anic verdict about Jesus عليه السلام. For others, their Christian identity is so vital and dynamic that they feel the urgent need to consider seriously and conscientiously the challenge of Islam. Some of those who are sincere in their search eventually convert to Islam.

As the Qur'an warns Muslims, the People of the Book will never be happy with you unless you believe what they believe (Qur'an 2:120; 5:51). Equally, Christians may feel that Muslims will never be satisfied with Christians—until every Christian knee bows towards Mecca. Muslims can, at best, know about Jesus عليه السلام, love and honor him, and follow his example because he was a devout servant of God. Christians claim to encounter Jesus, experience his saving grace, know his will and follow him, love and worship him as their personal savior. Locating him in a book is seen as attenuating his person and distorting his message of universal salvation.

The Qur'an commands all monotheists to acknowledge only one Lord (Qur'an 3:64). When Christians worship Jesus Christ as their Lord, Muslims see this as dishonoring Allah, if unintentionally. The Qur'an's call for locating common ground can succeed only if all contending parties see the true Jesus عليه السلام as a miraculously created being, appointed a prophet and messiah, the seal of the prophets of Israel, and essentially no more. Otherwise, the Christological deadlock shall remain permanent. For Muslims, the Jesus of Christian faith will remain a divisive figure whose mission cannot provide a basis for genuinely harmonious coexistence among the adherents of the Semitic trio of revealed faiths. The Qur'an envisages these three groups disputing in front of their Lord on the day of resurrection (Qur'an 5:48).

VIII. Breaking the Deadlock: Jesus' own Christology

Muslims are religiously obliged to demonstrate that Jesus himself preached only a pure monotheism. Only then can we prove that the Muslim Jesus عليه السلام was the true leader of the Jesus movement. No Muslim can take as a leader someone who rejects or compromises strict Abrahamic monotheism. This is an essential qualification for anyone who claims to be a leader or exemplar for Muslims.

Throughout the Second Temple period of Jewish history, no (orthodox) Jew thought that the messiah was anything but human. If Jesus عليه السلام entertained the prevalent Jewish view, he would have seen his role as that of a revolutionary, a zealous prophet and a human messiah who would deliver the Jews from the political bondage of Gentile nations.

Christian tradition has bestowed countless honorific titles on Jesus عليه السلام who, as Christ, enjoys the role of messiah, naturally, but also prophet, priest, and king. According to Christian doctrine, during Christ's divinely willed but humanly

accepted humiliation on earth, he was a mere servant under the law, voluntarily divested of his regal divine majesty; in his later exaltation as Lord, after the resurrection from the dead, he rose above the law. Leaving aside the Muslim caveat that Allah would never humiliate his messenger, did Jesus proclaim himself the Son of God and/or God?

The Hebrew Bible proclaims that God cannot be a man (Num. 23:19, Hos. 11:9). The Oneness of God is affirmed repeatedly (Isa. 45:21-22, Jonah 3:5-10). Jews thought of God as One, without a consort or son in any physical sense. The Bible gives divine sonship to others besides Jesus عليه السلام. Yahweh describes Israel (Jacob) عليه السلام as “my son, my firstborn” (Exod. 4:22). Solomon عليه السلام is God’s son (2 Sam. 7:13-14) while Luke (3:38) calls Adam عليه السلام “the son of God.” Angels are called sons of God (Job 1:6, 38:7) while all Israelites are said to be children of God (Deut. 14:1).

In the Christian Bible, the descriptions of Jesus range from a mere man (Acts 2:22, 17:31, John 8:40, Tim. 2:5) to “Son of God,” and the eternal heavenly Son who is equal to God the Father (John 5:18-24). Typically, however, Jesus of Nazareth is “a man accredited by God to you (Jews) by miracles, wonders, and signs” (Acts 2:22), simply a servant of God (e.g., Matt. 12:18).

Is there any Christian scriptural text to support Jesus’ divinity? John 1:1 states that Jesus was God’s word made manifest, a view partly confirmed by the Qur’an: angels give Mary “the good news of a word from God” (Qur’an 3:35). The opening verse of John can be read as supporting Jesus’ divinity, however, only if one already holds that view on other grounds. Otherwise, Jesus عليه السلام and God were not one in nature or identity but rather only in purpose—and as much can be said of any prophet’s relationship to God.

Jesus عليه السلام joined his disciples in the worship of God the Father (John 4:23, 16:23), exalted Him (John 5:19, 30) and prayed to Him all night (Luke 6:12; Heb. 5:7). In his distress, Jesus appealed to God (Matt. 27:46) and added that he was ascending to his Father in heaven (John 20:17, Rev. 3:12). Perhaps, however,

unlike other Jews, Jesus instructed his followers to pray, in a more intimate way, to “Our Father who is in heaven” (Luke 11:2).

Christians claim that, by virtue of his conduct, Jesus implicitly claimed divinity. But he also explicitly disavowed it by his words and obliquely denied that he was God (see Matt. 19:17, Luke 18:19). When some of the children of Israel accused Jesus of blasphemy, he defended the notion of “sons of God”—but only metaphorically (John 10:33-34). Moreover, in John 10:34-36, Jesus defends his use of “son of God” to mean merely “servant of God.” In defending himself against the charge of blasphemy, he appeals to Hebrew scripture where Moses is called a god (John 10:33-36).

Any prophet or saint can be idealized and revered as a pious human being without being deified. A spirit from God can be found in any true believer (Qur’an 58:22). Adam and his descendants are creatures with a divine spark or spirit in them but are not themselves divine or immortal. In the Beatitudes—maxims that open with ‘blessed be ... the meek, the poor’ and so on—Jesus عليه السلام called peacemakers the “sons of God,” synonymous with “servants of God.” A man who served God faithfully became close and dear to Him just as any son may be loved by his father for the same reason. Indeed, Paul calls all Christians sons of God (Gal. 4:1-7).

The more Jewish Jesus becomes, the more he resembles the Islamic Jesus عليه السلام. Objective historical and critical scholarship on Jesus for the past 100 years confirms the truth of the Qur’anic portrait as both converge on a Jewish Jesus. Islam is not annexing or colonizing the Christian Jesus, merely rescuing the historical character from the clutches of later church conjecture and dogma. Christians are called to change and meet Muslims on Muslim ground since the entire Qur’an is unchanged and unchangeable. By contrast, both testaments of the Bible are widely acknowledged by Jewish and Christian scholars themselves to be mainly edicts that evolved over centuries, under human if inspired redaction, the texts being, in the case of the New Testament, in demotic Greek while reporting the classical Aramaic speech of Jesus.

IX. Jesus' ethical teachings and leadership

Muslims think that Christians worship Jesus but ignore his teachings as a divinely inspired but human leader of his people. Muslims follow their Prophet's teachings but do not worship him. Christians retort that Jesus' ethics and his divinity are inseparable. His transient earthly life was a revelation of the eternal moral life of God. Fortunately, for both Christian and Muslim interfaith campaigners, Jesus عليه السلام affirmed the continuing validity of "the law and the prophets" (Matt. 5:17-20), referring respectively to the Torah and the oracles of the Hebrew prophets. In Christian understanding, the good news (gospel) is the new Torah—an oral revelation of Jesus' direct teaching to his chosen community of disciples. It is not *al-Injil*, presumably a book revealed in Aramaic analogous to the Qur'an in Arabic.

Christians see themselves as disciples of a leader who proclaimed an ethics of principled love (*agape*). Muslims typically see themselves as disciples of a prophet who preached a legislative ethics centered on social justice and duly tempered by mercy. These are not mutually exclusive alternatives. The Qur'an upholds both ideals. Thus, for example, it suffices to treat one's enemies justly and charitably. There is no need to love even one's personal enemies, let alone ideological ones. And no one does so in practice.

Jesus عليه السلام disowned the bond of blood in favor of the fellowship of faith (Mark 3:31-35; cf. Qur'an 9:23), perhaps as a reaction against the contemporaneous Jewish tendency to blindly place family first. The Prophet of Islam صلى الله عليه وسلم similarly placed the bond of faith above tribal affiliation while remaining solicitous about the welfare of his family, all believers, and especially his companions.

As a caring pastor and shepherd, Jesus عليه السلام regulated the conduct of his flock of disciples and companions. "Disciples" require legal "discipline" while companions share table fellowship with the leader-master. Jesus had friends, disciples, secret disciples, companions and students, male and female.

The Qur'an claims that Jesus' original disciples (*al-hawariyyun*) were inspired by God (Qur'an 5:111) to become his helpers in the cause of God (*al-Ansar*; Qur'an 3:52). No one can be a disciple of Jesus today for that generation has passed away. Jesus' disciples are to imitate him but only in certain particulars: clearly they cannot literally pick up the cross and be crucified! But they can imitate the moral aspects of his life, follow his morally excellent example—by imitating his compassionate dealings with the stranger and alien, by refusing to bear false witness against the neighbor and the adherents of rival faiths. Many Christian polemicists continue to slander the Prophet of Islam; their conduct is traitorous to the cause of Christ.

Countless Christian missions of healing and mercy, of free medical services and teaching, throughout the globe, have been inspired by Jesus' commandments of compassion. He singled out the marginalized for special regard. Allah placed mercy in the hearts of those who followed Jesus عليه السلام (Qur'an 57:27). A similar quality is found in the Prophet صلى الله عليه وسلم and in all practicing Muslims (Qur'an 9:128; 48:29).

For both Christians and Muslims, to follow the example of Jesus is to adopt his style of leadership as humble service to people. Jesus عليه السلام is God's servant in both the Qur'an and the New Testament. But as an itinerant healer, he is also the people's servant. He rejects the idea of the Gentile ideals of honor and status which amount to dominating and degrading people (Mark 10:35-45). He serves his disciples and even washes their feet as he counsels them to love one another just as he loved them. Such acts of virtuous personal service and their associated political and personal humility are also found in Islamic teachings.

Some interfaith Christian organizations want to know how Jesus عليه السلام himself would treat Muslims. They believe that as a merciful healer, pastor, leader, and guide, his moral passion for social justice would shine for all to see. He would uphold the Torah's regard for the alien in one's midst—though Muslims will not appear alien to Jesus on his return. One wonders, however, what he would make of

some American Republicans and British conservatives who invoke his name loudly while acting counter to his teachings.

X. Conclusions: Tasks for the Future

Muslims are disciples of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ since they are members of his *umma* and will be judged as such on the Day of Reckoning. Jesus عليه السلام had a unique vocation to Jews as a prophet of ethnic scope but one who predicted the advent of the last and universal messenger. Muslims are therefore not part of Jesus' *umma* but may follow his moral example. In fact, Abraham عليه السلام is the only prophet, along with the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, whose conduct is cited as an excellent exemplar for Muslims (Qur'an 60:4,6; 33:21).

Nonetheless, Muslims must believe in all the prophets عليهم السلام. We make no distinction between the prophets in terms of their mission as divinely commissioned messengers (Qur'an 2:136; 285). God preferred or elevated some prophets above others but their ranking is not given in the Qur'an. Those who received scripture, to whom God spoke directly or befriended, are naturally ranked higher. Qur'an 2:253 singles out Jesus عليه السلام for an eminently favorable position among the messengers. Some authentic *hadith* affirm that Muhammad ﷺ was unquestionably the greatest messenger.

“Follow the messengers—those who ask you for no payment and are, moreover, themselves guided (to Islam)” (Qur'an 36:20-21). This refers to three prophets specified in context but the advice is generally applicable as the Qur'an proclaims in its concluding homily after relating the story of Joseph عليه السلام (Qur'an 12:111).

Is there anything special about, or exclusive to, Jesus عليه السلام? The Christian Jesus rightly condemned the merely external and ritualistic observance of the law. His teachings confirm the role of mercy and sincerity of interior motivation, both

useful correctives to the excessive Pharisaic legalism of his day and indeed of ours.

Can Muslims find anything unique in his guidance and example? Or do they find all they need in Muhammad ﷺ? The Sufis followed Jesus as an ascetic prophet who renounced this lower world of power and lust. His breath heals; he is the spirit of Allah. In Persian mystical poetry, Jesus is often portrayed as a king who volunteered to become a slave, a motif found in Paul's letter to the Philippians. In Rumi, the cross figures prominently; divine love is the joy that wounds. These claims move well beyond the sober Qur'anic account of Jesus عليه السلام.

The Arabian Prophet was an ascetic who lived in voluntary holy poverty even after he became the uncrowned emperor of Arabia. There is extra reinforcement in Jesus' moral example but all his moral qualities are found abundantly in the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, the prophet who Jesus عليه السلام endorsed as his successor if not superior, just as John (*Yahya*) عليه السلام endorsed Jesus as the one whose sandals he was unfit to untie. Jesus predicted the coming of Muhammad ﷺ under the name of Ahmad. Strenuous Christian missionary effort among Muslims is totally misguided in claiming there is hunger for Jesus's message when, in fact, such missions have remained, until recently, an abject failure, a waste of time and spiritual resources. Their current success is for dubious reasons which may be explored on another occasion.

In modern post-Christian cultures, which form the majority of western societies, Jesus عليه السلام is typically the emblem of all that is good and right, a cultural receptacle for investing in and reflecting the best of the west. There is little regard for his historical message and actual teaching. He becomes the leader of every movement, whether conservative or progressive, which can vaguely invoke his insignia.

In this setting, Muslim *da'wah* work must encourage scrupulously fair readings of the scriptures of rival but related faiths. And, simultaneously, Muslims should write comparative biographies of Jesus and of Muhammad—to compare and contrast their styles of leadership. This will show the common and shared demands

of monotheistic discipleship and refute the false claim of those zealous Christians, especially on the far right, who shout loudly that their leader was an absolute pacifist while Islam's Prophet was a war-monger. Jesus عليه السلام evicted the money-changers from the Temple just as the Prophet صلى الله عليه وسلم cleansed the pagan environment of the Holy Mosque in Mecca. Economics and Mammon supplied the background to both acts of zeal on behalf of God. Sincere Jews, Christians, and Muslims can certainly secure a consensus of humane values that will enable them to live well together in the open societies of the modern world.