

THE QUR'ANIC APPROACH TO THE IDENTITY OF JESUS (KUR'AN'A GÖRE HZ. ISA'NIN KIMLIGI)

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Abstract

Jesus is mentioned in the Qur'an as one of the most important (*ulu al azm*) prophets. He is also an important being (either as a divine or as a human). In many ways Muslims and Christians attribute him similarly. Qur'an mentions him by different names as Isa, Messiah, Servant, Prophet, Messenger, Word, Spirit, Sign, Parable, Witness, Mercy, Eminent, One Brought Near, One of the Upright, Blessed. Among these names, Word is peculiar for Christians too. It is generally said that what Jesus is for Christians is what the Qur'an is for Muslims, since both are called as *Word*. In terms of English usage, this is acceptable, however in Arabic there are two words, *kalaam* and *kalimah*, that the first one is used for Qur'an and the second is for Jesus. In this article, this difference will be underlined.

Özet

Kur'an-i Kerim'de Hz. İsa en büyük peygamberler arasında (*Ulu-l'azm*) zikredilmektedir. Aynı zamanda o, Hristiyanlar için de (ister insan olarak görsünler, isterse ilahî bir şahsiyet olarak görsünler) önemli bir varlıktır. Pek çok açıdan Müslümanlar ile Hristiyanların ona verdikleri sıfatlarda benzerlikler vardır. Örneğin Kuran onu zikrederken, İsa, Mesih, Kul, Peygamber, Elçi, Kelime, Ruh, İşaret, Örnek, Sahit, Lütuf, Farklı, Yakınlaştırılmış, Yüceltilmiş, Kutsanmış gibi isim ve sıfatları kullanmaktadır. Bu isimler içerisinde geçen *Kelime*, Hristiyanlar için de önemlidir. Genelde, İngilizce karşılığı Word olan bu kavramın İslamda Kur'an için, Hristiyanlıkta ise İsa için kullanıldığı söylenerek bir paralellik bulunmaya çalışılır. İngilizce açısından makul gelebilecek bu yaklaşım, Arapça için uygun görülmemektedir, Kur'an'da geçen ve ayrı özellik taşıyan *kelam* ve *kelime* kavramlarından birincisi Kur'an, ikincisi ise İsa için kullanılmaktadır. Bu makalede adı geçen farklılık vurgulanmaktadır.

Introduction

There are two main sources for Muslims: The Qur'an and the Prophet's tradition, though the Qur'an takes precedence over the other. The

traditions of the Prophet Muhammed, which are regarded as a supplement to the Qur'an, do not stand on the same level as the Qur'an. It is called *the word of God*¹ and Jesus is referred to by the same term. This article discusses whether or not both *words* bear the same meaning in the Qur'an. For a better understanding of the Muslims' situation before the Qur'an, which includes stories, orders, explanations and particularly an account of Jesus, it is more suitable to first of all have a look at the meaning of scripture among Muslims. The orientalist author Kenneth Cragg says that the Qur'an is seen as literal revelation, explicitly communicated in the Arabic language by celestial mediation to the Prophet who is ensured protection from even slips of the tongue. He concludes that the scripture is divine, free from verbal error and, more important, the necessity of scholarly intervention.² In his description the expression "literal revelation" is hard to accept. Revelation cannot be literal since it's main quality is to be silent, unknown by others. Revelation is a religious experience that Muhammad had with God and because of this relationship the Qur'an was given to him. To rephrase this idea, what we read is not a revelation, because God does not reveal it to us, rather it is a product of God's revelation to Muhammad. Therefore, it is more proper to say that the Qur'an is a "literal result of divine revelation". In the Surah of *Qiyamah Qur'an* (which means reading) comes after the revelation.³ Allah spoke to Muhammad through revelation, and to us through the Qur'an. According to the same verses, when Muhammad read and communicated it to us, it became the Qur'an, though its reading was under the control of God. Muslims believe that the Qur'an is not the Prophet's work but that it has divine origin and every letter, as it is believed, is a gift from God and is pure truth. Since the Qur'an is believed to come direct from Allah, Muslims therefore desire to understand its meaning fully.

1- Qur'anic Jesus in General

According to the Qur'an Isa (Jesus)⁴ is one of the most important prophets. The Qur'an regards Jesus (who is mentioned in the Qur'an as Isa, Messiah, Servant, Prophet, Messenger, Word, Spirit, Sign, Parable, Witness, Mercy, Eminent, One Brought Near, One of the Upright, Blessed⁵) as a prophet, the son of Mary, the virgin mother who conceived without knowledge of a man. His birth was similar to that of Adam: Allah (God) said "be!" and he was⁶. He was the Messiah, the Word of God, and performed many miracles even from his birth. He was not crucified on the cross. Allah saved him from his enemies, and, on the Day of Judgment,

Jesus will complain to God of those who called him God. Al-Husayni gives an organized summary of verses saying that firstly, the Qur'an relates in detail the miraculous birth of Christ. Secondly, the Qur'an advocated the prophecy of Christ. Thirdly, the Qur'an enumerated the miracles of Christ, which were signs of his prophecy. Fourthly, the Qur'an made a sharp distinction between Christ and deity. Finally, the Qur'an confirms the view of the Gospels that God raised Christ unto Himself, but it rejects the contention of Christ's enemies that they crucified and killed him.⁷ As to the fourth point, in terms of the relation between Christians and Muslims, the Qur'an says that, although the closest people to Muslims are those who say: We are *Nasara* (Christians), there is a very big difference in how Christians and Muslims regard Jesus. The main point of contention concerns the claims of Jesus' divinity in Christian tradition. To understand this distinction, from the Qur'anic perspective, we may ask the following questions and try to find their answers in the Islamic tradition: What are a prophet's duties? What is the meaning of the *Word of God* in the Islamic literature as compared to Christian tradition? Concerning Jesus, do the statements of the Qur'an have the same meaning as those of Christians? What is the meaning of *Virgin*? To bring the matter to the light of day, we have to look at the Qur'anic accounts of Jesus in detail, and mention the differences as they occur.

2- His Life in the Quran

First of all, one sees that the Qur'an mentions the birth stories of Jesus in detail. According to the Qur'an, God chose Jesus' mother, Mary, and made her pure. Even from her birth, she was under the protection and surveillance of God:

When the wife of Imran said: 'Lord, I vow to Your service my unborn child: accept my offering. For you see and know all things.' When she gave birth to her daughter she said: 'Lord, a daughter is born to me.' God was well aware what the child was. A female birth is not the same as a male. 'I have named her Mary: I entrust her into Your protection and her seed after her from the malice of Satan.' Her Lord received her with gracious favor and under His hand she grew into a goodly child. The Lord gave her into the care of Zachariah.⁸

And when the angels said: O Mary! Lo! Allah hath chosen thee and made thee pure, and hath preferred thee above (all) the women of creation.⁹

When the time came, Allah announced to Mary the glad tidings:

And (remember) when the angels said: Oh Mary! Allah giveth thee glad tidings of a word from Him, whose name is the Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary, illustrious in the world and the Hereafter and one of those brought near (unto Allah). He will speak unto mankind in his cradle and in his manhood, and he is of the righteous. She said: "My Lord! How can I have a child when no mortal hath touched me?" He said: "So (it will be). Allah creates what He will. If he decrees a thing, He saith unto it only: Be! And it is."¹⁰

According to the Qur'an there is a correspondence between Jesus and Adam's creation. A comparison between them is given in the following verse and it enables us to conclude without a doubt that as God created Jesus without the intervention of a human father so too did he create Adam from dust:

These verses as signs We thus recite to you and the Reminder that brings wisdom. God would have you think of Jesus as you think of Adam, created by God from the dust, saying to him: 'be' and into being he came. This is the truth from your Lord, so do not be among those who are dubious.¹¹

In this verse the Qur'an makes it clear that the birth of Jesus without the intervention of a human father does not make him the Son of God and mentions a further example in Adam who was created by God without a father and mother.

According to the Qur'an, Jesus is a sign and symbol of Allah's might not only to the Israelites but also to the world:

Jesus was none other than a servant on whom We bestowed grace and whom We made to be a symbol to the sons of Israel.¹²

One who guarded her chastity, We breathed into her [Mary] of Our spirit and We made her and her son a sign to the worlds.¹³

Concerning this verse, Cragg says that Jesus and his Mother as 'signs' have a distinct emphasis in the Qur'anic picture. It records the fact and the nature of his birth, his mission as a prophet, the content of his message and his fidelity to it, the drama of his experience of rejection and final vindication.¹⁴

3- His Prophetic Mission

The Qur'an upholds that Jesus was a prophet, even from his birth¹⁵, sent with God-given signs, and strengthened by the Holy Spirit.¹⁶ The Qur'an does not see any difference between the prophets in terms of their roles and responsibilities of delivery of divine news to people and urges Muslims to believe in all the prophets from Abraham to Jesus and to make no distinction between any of them. Muhammad Abduh explains God's sending prophets as a spiritual need.¹⁷ According to the Qur'an, Allah creates some miracles in the hands of his messengers in order to convince those who doubt their mission. These miracles differ in accordance with the capacity and the culture of the community to which a messenger is sent. As we see from the Qur'an, Jesus performed, by the will of God, a lot of miracles which were signs of his prophecy, such as creating a living bird out of clay, healing the blind and lepers, bringing the dead to life, knowing what people eat and store up in their houses, and the bringing down of a table from heaven to be used for a festival.¹⁸

The Qur'an mentions Jesus as *the Word of God* in the same verse that also rejects his divinity and trinity:

People of Book, do not go to unwarranted lengths in your religion and get involved in false utterances relating to God. Truly Jesus, Mary's son, was the messenger of God and His Word- the word that He imparted to Mary- and a spirit from Him. Believe, then, in God and His messengers and do not talk of three gods. You are well advised to abandon such ideas. Truly God is one God. Glory be to Him and no 'son' to Him whose are all things in the heavens and the earth, their one and only guardian!¹⁹

This is one of the three verses where the expression of *the Word of God* is mentioned. The others are:

And the angels called to him as he stood praying in the sanctuary: Allah gives you glad tidings of (a son whose name is) John, (who comes) to confirm a word from Allah, lordly, chaste, a Prophet of the righteous.²⁰

(And remember) when the angels said: O Mary! Lo! Allah gives you glad tidings of a word from Him, whose name is the Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary, illustrious in the world and the hereafter, and one of those brought near (unto Allah).²¹

4- “Word” in the Quran and Christianity

The Qur’anic explanation of *Word*²² has very different meaning in Christianity whose whole theology depends on the interpretation of those words in a special way. Although Christian scholars in every shifting paradigm interpreted the meaning of the *Word* from a different point of view, in the history of Christianity the main idea was always the same: Jesus is the Word of God in the sense that he is like one of His attributes, so he is not to be separated from the divine identity. Comparing Christianity and Islam, some scholars say that the Jesus of Christianity corresponds to that of the Qur’an of Islam, but there are reasons not to accept this.²³ First of all, there are two words in Arabic: *kalimah* and *kalam*, which have been translated into English as *word*. However, each of these two Arabic words differ depending upon context in such a way that *kalimah* usually means the product of a speech and is not used to express someone’s attribute. In other words, *kalimah* is a result of the person’s action. On the other hand, *kalam*, is, in general, used to describe a personal quality. In the Qur’an, speaking in Jesus’ case, the word *kalimah* is used, and that indicates that Jesus is a result of Allah’s attribute of speaking: He said ‘be’, then he (Jesus) was. In that sense, there is no relation between Muslims’ belief and that of Christians who believe in Jesus’ divinity. Geoffrey Parrender quotes from Baydawi when he explains the reason for calling Jesus the *word*, saying: “because he came into existence by God’s command without a father, so that he resembled the new creations, who are the world of command.”²⁴ According to Razi Jesus was called the word because he was the fulfillment of the word spoken to the prophets.²⁵ Cragg interprets the same word and emphasizes the difference between Muslim and Christian understanding saying that ‘His (God’s) word’ means, not any metaphysical status other than the dignity of apostleship, but simply the fact of birth by verbal promise to Mary and, as the story indicates, without the intervention of human paternity.²⁶

The Qur’an refuses the idea of trinity in different verses, for example:

They surely disbelieve who say: ‘So! Allah is the third of three,’ when there is no God save the One God.²⁷

The Qur’an quoted Jesus as having said: “Worship Allah, my Lord and your Lord.”²⁸ He is not a divine being, so he should worship Allah.

The Qur’an confirms the view of the Gospel that God raised Jesus unto Himself²⁹, but it rejects the contention of Jesus’s enemies that they killed and crucified him:

As for their claim that they killed the Messiah Jesus, Mary's son, the messenger of God, the truth is they did not kill him, nor did they crucify him. They were under the illusion that they had. There is a lot of doubt about this matter among those who are at odds over it. They have no real knowledge but follow only surmise. Assuredly they did not kill him. On the contrary, God rose him to Himself-God whose are all wisdom and power. And before they come to die, the people of Book, to a man, will surely believe him. On the day of resurrection he will be witness against them.³⁰

Conclusion

The Quran views Jesus differently from that of Christians in many ways. It is not only theological approaches that make them different, but also terms that are understood differently. If one says, faith creates the terms, then, the second argument might be meaningless. However, especially in Islam, it is believed that terms create faith and therefore terms and their meanings are very important. These terms have semantic contexts in both Islam and Christianity. Since their semantic contexts vary, then, their meanings should be different. It is not reasonable to take a term shared in both religions and make an assertion depending on the judgment that they have the same meaning. In this article, the term "word" is given as an example. Just taking this one term, we cannot compare or equal the Jesus of Christianity and that of the Qur'an.

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Notes:

- ¹ Ishaq Musa al-Husayni, "Christ in the Qur'an and in Modern Arabic Literature", *Muslim World*, 1960, L, 297.
- ² Kenneth Cragg, *Jesus and the Muslims*, (London, 1985), 8.
- ³ 75. Qiyamah, 16-19: "Stir not thy tongue herewith to hasten it. Lo! Upon Us (resteth) the putting together thereof and the reading thereof. And when We read it, follow thou the reading: Then lo! Upon Us (resteth) the explanation thereof."
- ⁴ There is no doubt that Isa of the Qur'an corresponds the Jesus of the Bible. Cragg, *Ibid.*, 37-38.
- ⁵ Geoffrey Parrinder, *Jesus in the Qur'an*, (New York: 1965), 30-55.
- ⁶ But, not in the same sense as in the New Testament. See: Roelf. S. Kuitse, "Christology in the Qur'an", *Missiology*, 1992, XX, 357.
- ⁷ al-Husayni, *Ibid.*, 298-9.
- ⁸ 3. Al-i Imran, 35-36.
- ⁹ 3. Al-i Imran, 42.
- ¹⁰ 3. Al-i Imran, 45-47.
- ¹¹ 3. Al-i Imran, 60.
- ¹² 43. Zuhruf, 59.
- ¹³ 21. Anbiya, 91.
- ¹⁴ Cragg, *Ibid.*, 33.
- ¹⁵ 19. Maryam, 29-33: "Whereupon she simply turned their glances in the child's direction, and they retorted: 'How shall we address words to a child in the cradle?' And the child said: 'I am the servant of God. He has given me the Book and appointed me a prophet, and He has made me blessed where-ever I am. He has commanded me to pray and to do alms all my life long and to be dutiful to my mother. What belongs to the arrogant and the wretched has no place in His will for me. Blessed am I in my day of birth, my day of death and my day of resurrection of life.'"
- ¹⁶ 2. Bakarah, 87: "...We brought Jesus, son of Mary, the clear truths and upheld him with the holy spirit. Every time there came to you an apostle for whose message you had no appetite within you, you reacted in proud disdain. Some of the messengers you said were liars and some you put to death."
- ¹⁷ Muhammad Abduh, *The Theology of Unity*, Trans. Ishaq Musa and Kenneth Cragg, (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1966), 101.
- ¹⁸ 3. Al-i Imran, 45-51; 5. Maidah, 112-115.
- ¹⁹ 4. Nisa, 171.
- ²⁰ 3. Al-i Imran, 39.
- ²¹ 3. Al-i Imran, 45.
- ²² Word here corresponds Arabic words *kalâm* and *kalima*. Also *qawl* is translated as word and Jesus was called word by the term *qawl* also. In this article only *kalâm* and *kalima* will be discussed. For a further explanation see: Mahmoud M. Ayyoub, "Towards an Islamic Christology, II: The Death of Jesus, Reality or Delusion", *Muslim World*, 1980, LXX, 92-4.
- ²³ For a different aspect of the problem, see: Abd al-Kareem al-Khatib, "Christ in the Qur'an, the Taurat, and the Injil", *Muslim World*, 1971, LXI, 94-5; Kuitse, *Ibid.*, 367.
- ²⁴ Parrinder, *Ibid.*, 45.

²⁵ Parrinder, *Ibid.*, 46.

²⁶ Cragg, *Ibid.*, 32.

²⁷ 5. Maidah, 73.

²⁸ 5. Maidah, 117.

²⁹ 3. Al-i Imran, 55: "Then God said: 'O Jesus, I am causing you to die and will exalt you to Myself, vindicating you from the people of unbelief over whom your followers will have victory at my hand and then, at the resurrection, is the home coming of you all. I will be arbiter between you about all that is in contention among you.'"

³⁰ 4. Nisa, 157-159.