

# THE QUESTION OF DEITY

By GSS

## INTRODUCTION

Is Christ God incarnate? This question lies at the heart of the greatest controversy between followers of Islam and followers of Christianity. It has been the subject of debate in books, on television and radio, in places of worship, in homes and on the streets. Just who Christ is is an inescapable question for both the Muslim and the Christian. And how one answers this question will determine and be determined by what one believes about the nature and ministry of Christ, and the role of Christ in his life. While Christianity is a religion that is centered on Christ, Islam is certainly not devoid of any influence from Him or His teaching, for the Qur'an has much to say about Christ. This report will explore the similarities as well as the differences of the Christ of each religion, and their implications on the perception of Christ for the adherent of each faith.

## THE LIFE OF CHRIST

### His Birth

Both the Qur'an and the Bible are in agreement in portraying Christ's birth as unique in that He was born of the virgin Mary (Maryam). The Qur'an, in Surah 19:18-22, records a conversation between Mary and the angel Gabriel, in which Gabriel announces that she will bear a son, though untouched by any man, and He will be a "revelation for mankind." He is even referred to in Surah 3:45 as "the Messiah", as He is in John 1:41, when Andrew announced to his brother, Peter, that he had found the awaited Messiah after meeting Jesus. However, while Christians view the Messiah as the prophesied anointed one who will redeem mankind, some scholars of the Qur'an regard "Messiah" as no more than a name or merely a descriptive title meaning "one who travels." The significance to the Muslim that Jesus was born of a virgin is that God (Allah) set Him apart from all other men, including the prophets. The Qur'an teaches that Jesus was blessed by God (Surah 19:31), and that He was supported by the Holy Spirit (Surah 2:253). At the announcement of His birth Gabriel declared that Jesus would be "faultless" (Surah 19:19), a quality not attributed to any other prophet in the Qur'an. Likewise, Christian doctrine holds that Christ was ministered to by the Holy Spirit, and was without sin.

However, lines are drawn over the issue of Christ's nature: Is Christ man, or deity, or both? Herein lies much misunderstanding and controversy. According to Christian terminology, Jesus is "the only begotten Son of God." The debate over this concept was prevalent in the time of Muhammad. Though the early verses in the Qur'an deal sympathetically to Christian beliefs, those written during the latter part of Muhammad's ministry became increasingly harsh and direct in refuting the deity of Christ, for such a doctrine was in conflict with Islam's belief in the unity of God. One such verse is Surah 5:72-73, which clearly warns against the heresy of ascribing a partner to God. An Arabic inscription within the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem evidences the importance of this warning: "God forbid that He should have a Son." Ahmed Deedat expresses the Muslim's objection to the teaching that Jesus is "the only begotten Son of God" because "begetting is an animal act, belonging to the lower animal functions of sex. In his view, consistent with that of many Muslims, the Christian teaching of the Sonship of Christ implies a sexual relation between God and Mary. However, the account of Mary's conception as recorded in Luke 1:35 indicates, not a sexual encounter by God, but a creative act by the Holy Spirit that was a miracle.

According to Christian doctrine, Jesus is fully man and fully God. In the first chapter of the book of John, the writer, referring to Jesus as "the Word," says, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." Three truths about the nature of Christ are evident in this passage: Christ was already in existence with God before the creation of the world, He was in

communion with God, and, though He was distinct from God, the "Word," Christ, was identical in essence with God. Then in verse 14, John writes, "And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us." Thus Jesus, who was God from the beginning, became humanity in His incarnation. But even as a man, Jesus possessed all the attributes of deity.

In the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, Jesus is the second member of the Godhead. The doctrine of the Trinity means that within one God there are three distinct persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Evidence of the Trinity is recorded in Matthew 3:16-17 and Luke 3:22, where there are two accounts of the baptism of Jesus, after which the Holy Spirit is seen descending on Him and the voice of God is heard confirming His approval. Jesus also mentions the "trinitarian formula" in the Great Commission in Matthew 28:19.

It is apparent from Surah 5:116 that Muhammad misunderstood the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, in which he describes the Trinity as consisting of Allah, Jesus, and Mary. This corruption of the Christian Trinity doctrine may have come from one of the heretical sects that were expelled by the church councils during the fifth and sixth centuries over a dispute regarding the nature of Christ and the Trinity. Many Christians with whom Muhammad would have had contact belonged to some of these groups, such as the Monophysites and the Nestorians.

The Christian concept of the "triune God" cannot be fully understood by man and, therefore, adequately explained, though often attempted. Zachariah Butrus attempted one such explanation:

"Existing in Himself, so He declared Himself as the Father  
Speaking His word, so He declared Himself as the Son, the Word  
Alive in His spirit, so He declared Himself as the Holy Spirit."

Consequently, Muslims maintain that such doctrine is a form of polytheism.

### **His Crucifixion**

The Qur'an is also emphatic in its refutation of the crucifixion of Christ, clearly stating that Jesus was not killed or crucified, but only appeared so. From this passage, many theories have been spawned to explain the events of the crucifixion. One popular theory holds that God cast the likeness on another (possibly Judas) and took Jesus to heaven without having to experience death. Thus, the Christian accounts of the death and resurrection of Christ are dismissed as the result of corrupted scriptures.

Christian doctrine, on the other hand, consists of four accounts of the arrest, trial, crucifixion, burial, and resurrection of Christ. These accounts, intended to be read literally, indicate the presence of many eyewitnesses to each event, among whom were Jesus' mother, His apostles, many followers, the Roman centurion who confirmed Jesus' death, and Joseph of Arimathea, who prepared Jesus' body for burial. There are also many incidents recorded in the Bible of people encountering Jesus during the forty days after His resurrection. When He was finally received into Heaven, according to Mark 16:19, Jesus took His place at the right hand of God where He awaits the day when He will judge the world.

### **His Second Coming**

Regardless of their respective beliefs of how Jesus departed this world, both Muslims and Christians believe He will return. The Muslim's belief about Christ's Second Coming is found, not in the Qur'an, but in various stories of Muslim tradition. George W. Braswell, Jr. writes, "According to these traditions Jesus will return from heaven, battle the Antichrist, and defeat him, Jesus will confess Islam, kill all swine, break all crosses, and establish a millennium of righteousness. There is a tradition that Jesus will marry and have children." Other traditions hold that Jesus will declare Islam as the true religion and that He will marry and die. In anticipation of Jesus' burial, Muslims have already prepared a place for Him next to Muhammad.

According to Christian doctrine, Christ will one day appear in the clouds to receive all saints, both living and dead, after which will be a time of tribulation on earth. At the end of the tribulation Christ will return riding on a white horse, lead the saints into battle and destroy those who oppose Him, bind Satan, and reign on earth for 1000 years. Afterwards Satan will be loosed on earth until the day when

Christ will sit in judgement of all men, and angels, including Satan, in what is referred to as the "Great White Throne Judgement," using a "book of life" as His standard. This book contains the names of those who worshiped God prior to Christ's ministry and those who lived after His ministry and accepted Christ as God's Son and Redeemer. In this light, Jesus is referred to in Christian theology as the "Righteous Judge". Those whose names are not written in the book of life are then thrown into the "lake of fire" for eternity. For the faithful who remain, Christ will rule over them in a new, eternal kingdom that is beautifully adorned and is the dwelling place of God.

## **THE MINISTRY OF CHRIST**

### **His Miracles**

Christ is portrayed in both Islam and Christianity as a miracle worker. But the Bible and the Qur'an differ in their claims as to when Christ began His ministry of miracles. The Bible, in John chapter 2, declares Jesus' miracle of turning water into wine when He was an adult as being His first miracle. The Qur'an, however, records two childhood miracles of Jesus: one in which He fashioned a bird out of clay and breathed into it to give it life (5:110), and one in which He reportedly spoke as an infant to defend His mother (19:27-33). But both the Bible and the Qur'an teach that Jesus healed the blind and the leper and raised the dead. While the purpose of Jesus' miracles in the Qur'an seems to be to demonstrate the power of God, the purpose of His miracles in the Bible is primarily to prove that He is God.

### **His Message**

The book of Matthew says that from the beginning of Jesus' ministry His message was, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near" (4:17). Throughout His ministry, Jesus taught parables that promoted high moral principles, personal responsibility, relationships with others, salvation, and dedication to the work of the kingdom. He often quoted passages from the Old Testament, interpreting them in ways that challenged the legalism of the Pharisees, resulting in many public confrontations with them. Jesus even warned His disciples to beware of the teaching of the Pharisees. While the Pharisees were teaching that salvation comes through the keeping of many laws (salvation through works), Jesus taught that salvation comes through faith by God's grace. On several occasions He predicted his death and resurrection, and taught that salvation would come by faith in Him.

According to the Qur'an, Jesus was sent by God to be a messenger to the children of Israel, and He was to teach "the Scripture and wisdom, and the Torah and the Gospel" (3:48-49). The Qur'an makes expressly clear that Jesus was only a prophet, a slave of Allah whose purpose was to "make plain some of that concerning which ye differ" (43:63). The Jesus of the Qur'an emphatically denies having claimed deity for Himself when He says, "It was not mine to utter that to which I had no right." However, according to the Bible, it was Jesus' claim as being "the Christ, the Son of God" on which He was convicted for blasphemy and crucified.

## **THE PERCEPTIONS OF CHRIST**

### **Past: Prophetic Claims**

That the coming of Christ and His purpose were anticipated many years before His birth are well attested in many prophecies of the Old Testament. Isaiah 52:13-53:12, often referred to as the "Gospel of Isaiah," describes the coming of a servant of humble birth who would suffer physical persecution and death for men's sins. And through His suffering He would bring peace. Early Jewish tradition understood this passage to be speaking of the Messiah, as did the early Christians. In Micah 5:2, Bethlehem is prophesied to be the place of the Messiah's birth. Even the manner of Jesus' death is foretold in Psalm 22 and 69.

One prophecy, however, has been much debated as to whether it refers to Muhammad or Jesus. Deuteronomy 18:15-20 describes a prophet whom God would raise up who would be like Moses and

would speak in God's name. Dr. Jamal Badawi states that this is a reference to Muhammad, noting that Israelites "brethren" is "a reference to their Ishmaelite cousins. Badawi also claims that Moses and Muhammad are two prophets who are very much alike, noting similarities such as "the natural birth, family life and death of Moses and Muhammad but not of Jesus." However, Stephen confirmed in Acts 7:37 that Jesus was, in fact, the prophet like Moses.

Scholars of Islam consider all of the prophecies about Christ as either fabrications (corruption of the scripture) or simply having no implications of Messiahship (in the Christian sense).

### **Past: Contemporary Perceptions**

How did the people who met Jesus and lived when He lived perceive Him? The Qur'an sheds little light on what others had to say about Jesus. Surah 5:111 states that Jesus' disciples declared themselves to be Muslims, which would imply that they would not have accepted any claim of His deity. The Bible, however, contains many passages that indicate who people thought Jesus was. When Jesus asked Simon Peter, "Whom say ye that I am?" Peter answered, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God." After Christ's resurrection He appeared to Thomas, who, when he touched the wounds in Christ's hands and side, declared, "My Lord and my God." Many people who saw Jesus in Jerusalem declared that He was the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee. In Matthew's account of the crucifixion of Jesus, he records when Jesus died the curtain of the temple was torn from top to bottom, the earth shook, and people who had died were raised to life. After seeing these things a Roman centurion exclaimed, "Surely He was the Son of God."

The Bible also records instances when demons acknowledged Jesus as the Son of God. Mark 3:11 says, "And unclean spirits, when they saw Him, fell down before Him, and cried, saying, 'Thou art the Son of God.'" But the most compelling acknowledgement of Jesus as the Son of God is from God, spoken on two occasions: at Jesus' baptism and on the mountain where He was transfigured in the presence of Peter, James, and John. On each occasion God proclaimed, "This is my beloved Son."

These testimonies - of Jesus' disciples, of the many common people, of the centurion, of demons, and of God Himself - form the basis of the Christian's claim that Jesus is truly the Son of God.

### **Present: Muslim's View**

So who do Muslims today believe Jesus is? Ahmed Deedat explains, "We Muslims believe, that Jesus was one of the mightiest messengers of God, that He was the Christ, that He was born miraculously - without any male intervention...that He gave life to the dead by God's permission, and that He healed those born blind and the lepers by God's permission. In fact no Muslim is a Muslim if he does not believe in Jesus!"

In Surah 4:163-164, the Qur'an equates Jesus with the prophets Noah, Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob and the tribes, Job, Jonah, Aaron, Solomon, David, and Moses. His explicit purpose, according to Surah 43:59, was to be a pattern for the Children of Israel. Thus, in Islam, Jesus is not the means for salvation. Rejecting salvation based on faith in Christ, the Muslim's only hope to enter Paradise is based on works, primarily the keeping of the five pillars of Islam, as indicated in Hadith 29.

In Islam there is only hope of salvation, but no assurance. When asked by his daughter, Fatima, what would be her fate on the day of judgement, Muhammed replied, "Say: I am no new thing among the messengers (of Allah), nor know I what will be done with me or with you. I do but follow that which is inspired in me, and I am but a plain warner." M. Ali states, "Muslims claim Muhammad to be the 'seal' and 'greatest' prophet, yet he was not sure of going to heaven himself, nor could he offer that assurance even to his own daughter."

### **Present: Christian's View**

In Christian doctrine, Jesus Christ is the only means of salvation. That Jesus is the Savior is reflected in the many titles of His name. As the "Bread of Life" He is the sustainer of life; as the "Good Shepherd" He is man's guide; as "the Resurrection and the Life" He has power over death. In Matthew 1:21,

Gabriel told Mary that His name would be Jesus, "for He shall save His people from their sins." And in Isaiah 7:14, the prophet declared that His name would be Immanuel, meaning "God with us." Jesus, Himself, said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me."

## Conclusion

After His arrest, Jesus was taken to the high priest, who said to Him, "Tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God." Jesus answered, "Yes, it is as you say." He was then taken away and beaten and mocked. Then Jesus was brought before Pilate. Looking to the crowd, Pilate asked, "What shall I do then with Jesus which is called Christ?"

This question has remained on the heart of every man ever since. But in order to decide what to do with Christ, one must first determine who Christ is by considering the evidence. On the one hand there are the words of the prophet Muhammad, who asserted that Jesus was only a prophet and a great teacher, and no assurance of salvation. On the other hand there are the writings of the prophets and the many witnesses to Christ's ministry. And the Christ they proclaimed offers assurance of salvation by simple faith in Him. Thus, the question remains.

## NOTES:

1. According to George W. Braswell, Jr., Jesus is mentioned 93 times in some 15 chapters of the Qur'an ;Islam, p. 278
2. The Holy Qur'an, Maulanla Muhammad Ali, note 424, p. 142
3. Mark 4:14-19
4. Hebrews 4:15
5. John 3:18
6. Those verses written during the Meccan period.
7. The Person of Christ in the Gospel and the Koran, p. 4
8. Islam Reviewed, M. Ali, p. 9
9. Christ in Islam, Ahmed Deedat, 1985
10. Philippians 2:7
11. Islam, p. 247
12. God is One in the Holy Spirit, p. 11
13. Surah 4:157
14. Surah 5:15
15. Matthew 27-28; Mark 14-16; Luke 22-24; John 18-20
16. Mark 15:44-45
17. John 19:38-42
18. Matthew 28; Mark 16; Luke 24; John 20-21; Acts 1:1-11; Acts 9:1-19
19. Islam, p. 284
20. Islam Reviewed, p. 72
21. I Thessalonians 4:16-17
22. Daniel 9:26-27
23. Revelation 19:11-21
24. Revelation 20:1-3
25. Revelation 19:10-15
26. Revelation 20:11-12
27. Revelation 20:15
28. Revelation 21:1-3
29. Mark 2:1-12
30. Matthew 16:6
31. Matthew 16:21; Mark 10:32-34; 14:27-28; Luke 18:31-33; John 12:20-33
32. John 14:6
33. Surah 5:116
34. Matthew 26:63-65
35. Muhammad in the Bible, p. 2
36. Mark 16:15-16
37. John 20:25
38. Matthew 21:10
39. Matthew 27:50-54
40. See also Matthew 8:29; Mark 1:34
41. Matthew 3:17; Mark 1:11; Luke 3:22
42. Matthew 17:5; Mark 9:7; Luke 9:35
43. Christ In Islam, p. 2
44. Forty Hadith, p. 98
45. Surah 46:9
46. Islam Reviewed, p. 68
47. John 14:6

