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CHRIST IN THE SYNOPTIC GOSPELS AND THE QUR'AN: A BRIEF COMPARISON

Richard T. Nolan

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Introduction. A comparison of Islamic and Christian thought could well focus, in part, upon what may be a central, distinguishing issue, the Christological problem. Traditional, orthodox Christianity with its basic Nicene orientation has met resistance from Muslims because, as Dr. Robson has written: “The doctrine of the Unity of God is so vital to Islam, that anything which would seem to weaken it is abhorred.”ⁱ [Dr. Douglas commented, “In general, yes. But Muslims would agree with some elements of the Nicene Creed.”]

Needless to say, the Synoptic Gospels are rich in sources for a certain degree of understanding of the person of Christ. But, some Christians may be surprised to learn that

...the Qur’an has 25 passages, some of which speak in more or less detail of Jesus, others of which merely mention his name in passing. Six of these are attributed to the Meccan period of Muhammad’s ministry; the remainder belong to the Medina period, when Muhammad had more opportunity of coming in touch with different communities than he had had in Mecca. When one compares these two groups of passages, it becomes clear that Muhammad gained information in Medina which he did not have in Mecca, and that he developed a hostility toward Christians which he did not show in the earlier period.ⁱⁱ

In this essay, it is the writer’s purpose to explore some points of agreement and difference between the Synoptic and Qur’anic views of Christ and to reflect upon some reasons for the differences. With focus upon four Christological motifs (Jesus as Man, as Messiah, as Son of Man, and as Son of God) an introductory comparison has been attempted.

ⁱJ. Robson, “Muhammedan Teaching about Jews,” *Moslem World*. (Hartford, Jan., 1939; Vol. XXIX, No. 1), p. 54.

ⁱⁱ*Ibid.*, p. 37.

Jesus the Man. In the Qur’ān a main point of emphasis, which one can hardly doubt, is the humanity of Jesus. He was born, though not of a human father, of Mary (III: 40 ff.). His birth is presented with some detail in the passage called “The Chapter of Mary”; here the virgin birth motif is clearly represented, as is the idea that God’s spirit spoke to Mary and informed her that Jesus was to be a sign (XIX, 21). As Dr. Smith has noted: “. . . Jesus was only a man like the other prophets, and he himself called men to the worship of the one God.”¹

It is true that the Qur’an acknowledges the miracles of Jesus, but does so *in the context of his humanity*. As Ishaq Musa al-Husayni points out so well:

...the Qur’an enumerated the miracles of Christ which were signs of his prophecy (not divinity)², such as creating a living bird out of clay, healing the blind and lepers, bringing the dead to life, knowing what the people eat and store up in their houses, and the bringing down of a table from heaven to be used for a festival. All these miracles Christ produced by the will of God in order to convince those who doubted his mission (Q. 111,46-49; V, 114-115).³

Throughout the Synoptic Gospels the actual humanity of Jesus is seriously implied, if not taken for granted. According to those Gospels, as well as John’s, both his mind and body underwent natural development. He experienced natural needs, such as hunger (Matt. IV:2; Mark XI:12; Luke IV:2) and human emotions (Matt. XXVI: 75; Mark XIV:72; Luke XXII:62).

Jesus’ religious experiences included prayer to the Father for strength and guidance to accomplish God’s will. Although Jesus used miraculous powers on occasion, he used them for God’s work, but faced real and repeated temptations that involved himself with internal and external conflicts. These characteristics are all very human, although most certainly, ones quite receptive to God’s will and purpose. The Synoptics include these motifs over and over again in their passages.

Whether Jesus was with or without sin is not conclusively indicated by the three Evangelists. There is little or no evidence of recollection of his own sins. It may be possible that Jesus knew no moral evil in his own life; but, on the other hand, the inclusion of any possible historical sins of Christ would

serve no purpose for the Synoptics' authors.

Both Scriptures, the Qur'ān and the Synoptic Gospels, seem to agree most definitely that Jesus was an historical human being. He was apparently a miracle worker, which was not uncommon then. Since the Qur'ān knows not of original sin and details of Christ's life, it would seem to be compatible with the Synoptic approach, which omits reference to any personal or intrinsic sins of Jesus. Thus, it may be concluded from both Scriptures that Jesus, whatever or whoever else he might have been, was definitely a human being. This the Qur'ān and the Gospels regard as a matter of fact.

Jesus as Son of Man. At the time of the first century C.E., "Son of Man" was a divine title. It meant "a supernatural, heavenly being."⁴ The title has its ancestry in Old Testament religion. By the time of Daniel it had taken on the technical meaning symbolically representing the ideal Israel and also, secondarily, a real heavenly person.

Its uses in the Synoptics are to denote One who is to appear at the Last Judgment "coming with the clouds of heaven" (Mark XIV:62) or "sitting on the throne of his glory" (Matt.: XIX:28). Also, it is used in passages where it definitely relates to the future sufferings, death, and Resurrection of the Messiah (Matt. XVII:22; Mark VIII:31), and in narratives where it refers to the Christ himself (Matt. VIII:20; Luke VI:22).

Professor Laymon has this to say about Jesus' own use of the term:

In the issue at hand, instead of taking at face value the term "Son of Man" as found in Enoch, Daniel, and Ezekiel, Jesus may well have applied it to himself in his own way, to suggest a significance for his person and mission which he felt to be unique. It carried the ideas of both humility and exaltation that enabled him to keep from seeming to suggest an earthly royal ruler (Davidic), and yet made it possible to assert that there was a special significance to his person and work.⁵

In the Qur'ān the term under discussion is not employed, as far as this student knows. The nearest parallel, which is far from analogous, is "the fact that Muslims regard Christ as a prophet and apostle of God (Q. XIX, 30; LVII, 27), he is a prophet of a unique type. He is the only prophet born from a virgin mother, being from the spirit of God, and thus described in the Qur'ān as 'illustrious in the world and the Hereafter, and one of those brought near (unto Allah)' (Q. III, 45)."⁶

A main distinction between the Synoptic and Qur'ānic interpretations of this aspect of Christology would seem to be in the degree of uniqueness of Jesus. According to the New Testament, written through a Resurrection perspective, the title both links Jesus to humanity and singles him out from other men. It attributes to him earthly humiliation and supernatural glory. Perhaps to Jesus the title suggests one who embodies a life of service and suffering with transcendent glory. For the Synoptic writers, then, "Son of Man" might well have represented Jesus' divine calling and destiny, his humanity and uniqueness among men. But, the Qur'ān, seeing Jesus not in a divine or heavenly role, views him as a unique prophet. Perhaps if the compilers of the Qur'ān saw Jesus within an historical, Resurrection perspective, the degree of his uniqueness would be more compatible with the Synoptic viewpoint. Certainly if the Evangelists did not view Jesus within such a context, they, too, would have no reason to consider him in such a supernatural or eschatological sense. The Qur'ān sees him as a great prophet, a "Son of Man" in Laymon's interpretation, but not as unique as a Resurrection perspective would call for.

Jesus as Messiah. The idea of the Messiah had its roots in Jewish theology. Meaning "anointed," the term designated the person invested by God with special powers and functions, who is destined to appear as the divinely appointed deliverer and ruler of Israel. The Greek translation of the word as it appears in the Septuagint is *christos*, from which Jesus received the title, Christ.

With different emphases the Synoptics offer a picture of Jesus' Messiahship which seems to retain the essentials of the Old Testament motif, but also permeate the title with a unique "spiritual" meaning. This new insight seems to signify the Messiah as the bearer and finisher of God's purposed salvation. Unlike the Old Testament notion, Jesus' view was not primarily one of a lawgiver, political deliverer or

founder of a new faith; he was a deliverer from hardness of heart. Professor Laymon offers the following contribution:

It is my personal conclusion that Jesus did regard himself as the Messiah. This does not mean that he fitted himself automatically into any one of the historic or contemporary messianic patterns. Neither was it a matter of holding a specific title.... Instead, it was the reality of the relation he felt to God and men in the Kingdom that constituted for him a special function, and gave an unprecedented meaning to his life and death. He chose to do the will of his heavenly Father, and God chose to make him both Lord and Christ.⁷

The Qur'an definitely recognizes Jesus as the Messiah. The concept of messianism, which is implied rather than stated, would seem to indicate a New Testament rather than a Jewish interpretation. Jesus was, according to the Qur'an, not a political deliverer, but "The Messiah, Jesus the son of Mary, was only a messenger of Allah, and His word which He conveyed unto Mary, and a spirit from Him" (Q. IV, 171). One scholar has written:

...the function of the "son of Mary" is that of every prophet: to transmit the warning of God. ...In the Koran he is "different from other men", for he is born of the Word of God conveyed to Mary; but he is prophet among the prophets, one of the greatest of them, and his task is not yet ended, since he is to return at the end of time.⁸

The New Testament influence can be seen inasmuch as Jesus came with a message rather than a sword or scepter. But the absence of the *agape* motif of the Gospel is a serious omission in Qur'anic thought, and emphasizes the "warning" aspect of the Gospel rather than "loving." Thus, it might be said that the New Testament emphasis in the Messianic concept is that Jesus is a deliverer from stony hearts*, while the Qur'anic would seem to be that the Christ is a "warner." [*Dr. Douglas commented, "this, and more than this.]"

Jesus as Son of God. The origin of the title, "Son of God," must be looked for in the early Christian mission amongst the Gentiles, according to Dr. F.C. Grant. The same scholar states:

In native Jewish thought God could not have a son - the conception was simply mythological and denied the oneness of God. But for Gentile Christianity, possibly even for Diaspora Judaism, there could exist another divine being - or other beings - in the presence of God, subordinate to God, after the pattern of the Greek 'sons of God.'⁹

With whatever meaning Jesus himself may have understood his Sonship, the conception of him as the Son of God in the early Church was probably a corollary of his Messiahship. It is this writer's notion that the Synoptic motif, "Son of God," defies precise analysis, but does suggest a special, unique relationship between Jesus and God. As a major motif of Biblical thought, "Son of God" does not seem to lend itself to the later formulations of Nicaea. As al-Husayni notes:

...the Qur'an made a sharp distinction between Christ and deity. "The Messiah, Jesus the son of Mary, was only a messenger of Allah, and His word which He conveyed unto Mary, and a spirit from Him. So believe in Allah and His messengers and say not 'Three' ... Allah is only One God" (Q. V, 117).¹⁰

In the Qur'an itself we find the following words: "...the Christians say, 'The Messiah is a son of God.' Such the sayings in their mouths! They resemble the sayings of the Infidels of old! God do battle with them! How are they misguided!" (Q.IX, 30) In these words we find the distinct Old Testament persuasion which seeks to preserve at all costs the sovereignty and unity of God. It would be my opinion that the Qur'an has no quarrel with the Synoptics, for the Sonship implied there (*i. e.*, in the Synoptics) does *not* denote a Sonship of the Nicene variety. It is when Jesus is made into a Trinitarian type of Son that the Qur'an rebels, and here it does so most vehemently. Certainly the Qur'an would agree with the synoptics that Jesus had a special, unique relationship with God, and, perhaps, this is all the Synoptics mean by "Son of God."

Summary. In one scholar's words: "To sum up (a) the Qur'ān recognizes the virgin birth of Christ; (b) recognizes his miracles; (c) places him in a higher rank than that of all preceding prophets; (d) states that he was supported by the Holy Spirit; (e) calls him the Word of God; (f) defends his mission and reproaches them who rejected it; (g) supports the New Testament - the Gospel - as the revelation of God; and (h) confirms his ascension to God."¹¹

This student would attempt to sum up the Synoptic Christology in capsule form in this way: Jesus is the Messiah prophesied by the Old Testament who clarified the proper focus of Biblical religion, that focus being *agape*; he enjoyed a relationship with God unique among men expressible in human terms most adequately as "Son." A more precise Christological formulation does not seem to have been in the minds of the Gospels' writers.

Conclusion. A comparison of Synoptic and Qur'ānic Christology, in this limited inquiry, would seem to yield similar views of Jesus as a prophetic human being. Differing emphases seem to occur because of respective understandings of Jesus mission and his personal history. The three Gospels see his humanity, messiahship, and sonship in terms of a Gospel of *agape* and the resurrection event. The Qur'ān, lacking a witnessed perspective of Jesus' mission and resurrection, views Christ with a limited historical orientation and, therefore, with too moderate exaltation. [Dr. Douglas raised the question, "Where would 'the Cross' fit in this picture?"]

The writer has recently come to wonder whether God chose Muhammad, in part, to remind those of prophetic religion that God is One. It is interesting to note that the Nicene Council tried, perhaps with Scriptural misconceptions, to formulate too precisely Christ's relationship with God. Perhaps the good Fathers failed to realize that their intellectual orientation had become Greek rather than Hebraic. Such an attempt may have created a Trinitarian error, which Muhammad, who lived approximately 200 years after the Council, could help to repudiate. Perhaps a Nicene Christological misunderstanding and Hellenistic orientation have been challenged by Allah's Prophet, Judge of Nicaea.

ENDNOTES

¹H. P. Smith, *The Bible and Islam* (N.Y.,1897), p. 90.

²my parenthetical inclusion

³I. M. al-Husayni, "Christ in the Qur'an and in Modern Arabic," *The Muslim World* (Hartford, Oct., 1960; Vol. L, No.4), p. 298.

⁴F. C. Grant, "Mark, Introduction," *The Interpreter's Bible*, VII, p. 642.

⁵C. M. Laymon, *Christ In The New Testament* (N.Y., 1958), p. 149.

⁶I. M. al-Husayni, *op.cit.*, p. 297.

⁷C. M. Laymon, *op.cit.*, pp.149 f.

⁸L. Gardet, *Mohammedanism* (N.Y.,1961), p. 40.

⁹F. C. Grant, *op.cit.*, p. 643.

¹⁰I. M. al-Husayni, *op. cit.*, p. 299

¹¹*Ibid.*, p. 299.

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See "Information About Islam" at The Hartford Seminary - <http://macdonald.hartsem.edu/answers.htm> .

"Jesus: A Summary of the Points About Which Islam and Christianity Agree and Disagree"

Summarized by Dr. Alan Godlas

Both Islam and Christianity

- 1) revere Jesus and assert Jesus' holiness, in the sense that he lived in the world while being pure and free of sin;
- 2) believe that Mary, Jesus' mother, was decent, pure, and holy;
- 3) declare that Mary, a virgin, miraculously conceived Jesus;
- 4) assert that Jesus performed a number of miracles.

Concerning Jesus, Islam and Christianity differ in the following ways:

- 1) While Christianity asserts that Jesus is both human and divine, Islam does not accept the belief in Jesus' divinity. Hence, while Christians worship Jesus, Muslims instead revere Jesus and believe in him as a prophet, using the Qur'an (not the Bible) as a reliable record of knowledge about Jesus;
- 2) Although Christians believe that Jesus is the son of God, Muslims assert that God does not give birth and therefore has no sons or children. God is not physical for Muslims; and hence for Muslims God cannot be a father.
- 3) On the one hand, Christianity declares that Jesus was crucified. On the other hand, Islam asserts that it only seemed like Jesus was crucified, and that God miraculously "took him up to God, Himself."
- 4) While Christianity asserts that Jesus died in order to redeem the original sin of mankind or human sins as a whole, Muslims do not believe in Jesus as a redeemer and saviour, since they do not believe in original sin and since they do believe God's grace, guidance (in the form of prophetic revelation--the word of God), and human effort are sufficient for redemption and salvation.

For a more detailed exposition of these points see: [Where Islam and Christianity Agree and Differ on Jesus](#) by Imam Mohamad Jawad Chirri.

Return to [Dr. Godlas' Islamic Studies and Islam website](#)