

THE HISTORICAL JESUS vs. THE QUR'ANIC JESUS

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I. INTRODUCTION

The aim of this seminar will be to compare and contrast the **historical Jesus** with the **historical Muhammad**. What do mean by these terms? By *historical*, we mean the facts that we can ascertain about Jesus or Muhammad using all the methodological and critical tools that can be deployed by the historian. J. P. Meier offers a helpful illustration:

Suppose that a Catholic, a Protestant, a Jew, and an agnostic – all honest historians cognizant of 1st-century religious movements – were locked up in the bowels of the Harvard Divinity School library, put on a spartan diet, and not allowed to emerge until they had hammered out a consensus on who Jesus of Nazareth was and what he intended his own time and place. An essential requirement of this document would be that it be based on purely historical sources and arguments ... Something would be gained. We would have a rough draft of that the will-o'-the-wisp, "all reasonable people", could say about the historical Jesus. The document could serve as common ground, a starting point for dialogue ...¹

We begin, then, with the historical Jesus and, appropriately, with a history lesson.

1.1 The First Quest for the Historical Jesus

In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, as the Enlightenment project worked itself out in every field of knowledge, scholars began turning a critical eye to the New Testament accounts. Beginning with the German scholar Reimarus, the approach that rapidly gained popularity was to consider the Gospels were products of faith, not history.² This being the case, there was therefore a need to rediscover the Jesus of history.³ The following century saw a plethora of lives of Jesus along the same lines and bearing the same hallmarks. The 'quest of the historical Jesus', as Albert Schweitzer would christen it,⁴ had begun. It is also Schweitzer who is credited (along with Weiss) with destroying this first quest by so carefully exposing the *a priori* assumptions and flawed hermeneutics of the scholars engaged in it.

1.2 The Second Quest

For 50 years, not a lot happened, until in 1953 Ernst Käsemann gave a now famous lecture in which he set forth his view that the presence of faith *and* history in the Gospels does not mean that one writes them off, rather one sifts what Jesus said from later interpretations by the use of careful

¹ John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, Vol. 1, *The Roots of the Problem and the Person*, (New York: Doubleday, 1991) 1-2.

² At the same time as the First Quest was getting under way, the philosophical writings of Locke, Berkeley, Hume and Kant were leading to an increasing split in epistemology between 'fact' and 'value', 'ordinary truth' and 'higher truth', 'history' and 'theology' (see Peter Hicks, *Evangelicals and Truth*, (Leicester: IVP, 1998) 25-36). The wedge that Reimarus and others drove between the Jesus of faith and the Jesus of history fits the intellectual milieu like a glove.

³ N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, (London: SPCK, 1996)17 suggests that for Reimarus and those who followed him, the agenda was not simply finding the *real* Jesus of history, but more importantly showing that the Church's faith was not based on him.

⁴ Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, First Complete Edition, (New York: Macmillan, 2000 [1906]).

methods and criteria. This whole approach to the Gospels has been classified ‘the Second quest for the historical Jesus.’ Yet it, too, had its problems, not least that the result of this constant sifting of Jesus’ words tended to produce a very un-Jewish, demythologised Jesus.⁵

1.3 The Third Quest

We live now, however, in a time where a new approach has come to the fore, the so called ‘Third Quest for the historical Jesus’. Scholars like Wright, Meyer and Charlesworth have all pointed this out, highlighting the methodological differences that stand between Third Quest scholars and their predecessors. Briefly put, these include the willingness to take Jesus’ Jewishness seriously; an impetus from the new discoveries about first-century Judaism; serious import given to the first-century sources such as Josephus, the Dead Sea Scrolls and the OT Pseudepigrapha.⁶

These sources are major assets and can tell us a lot about the first-century Judaism in which Jesus lived. This is a major contrast with Muhammad, as we shall see later; we have little or no primary sources that can tell us about the pre-Islamic Arabia in which Muhammad lived, we have only much later Muslim sources.

2. What can the Third Quest help us with?

The Third Quest for the historical Jesus is, let us remember, dealing in **historical** questions — asking what a historical method can tell us. One important question on which it has focused is the question **did Jesus have a messianic self-understanding and if so, what form did it take?**

The question of Jesus and messiahship has always been something of a battleground in scholarship; the apparent disparity between the fact the term “Christ” appears so rarely in the gospels, hardly ever on the lips of Jesus in self-designation, yet when we come to the early church, the claim that Jesus was the Messiah is found in every extant strata and genre of material that we possess⁷; In short, Christianity was a messianic sect. Some scholars have in the past suggested the first Christians *made up this claim*. But the Third Quest, despite containing a mixture of believing and disbelieving scholars of all stripes, has, if anything, generally eroded this skeptical position and cast far more light on the question of how Jesus understood his messianic vocation.

3. Putting Jesus on the map of first-century Judaism

Axiomatic to the Third Quest is the importance of locating Jesus on the map of the Second Temple Judaism of his day. Not only were his thought patterns shaped by this context, but he also had to be able to communicate with the people of his day in a meaningful way.⁸ The sources available to the Third Quest scholar have shed much light on vast amounts of this Second Temple Jewish context including:

- The politics, both religious and secular
- The sociological makeup of the region — not least the large class divide between rich and poor and the way this dynamic worked itself out in the culture

⁵ Ben Witherington, III, *The Jesus Quest*, (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1995) 12.

⁶ See James H. Charlesworth, *Jesus within Judaism*, (London: SPCK, 1989) 26-28.

⁷ Marinus de Jonge, ‘Christ’ in David Noel Freedman, ed., *Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992) 915-920.

⁸ See Anthony E. Harvey, *Jesus and the Constraints of History*, (London: Duckworth, 1982) 2-10; cf. John K. Riches, *Jesus and the Transformation of Judaism*, (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1980) 31-42

- The religious groups whose message would have competed with Jesus; those who appear in the pages of the NT (e.g. the Pharisees) and those who don't (e.g. the Essenes).
- The ways in which the Judaism of the day had adapted itself to living under

So what did messiahship mean in such a setting? Second Temple Judaism was, it must be stressed, a rich and varied entity, but the prominent idea was probably that of Davidic, royal messiahship. But this was not the only model. Rather there were three common roles associated with the language of messiahship and of anointing: prophet, priest and king.⁹ Other variations include the Essenes out at Qumran, who looked forward to *two* Messiahs, a prophet and a king. In short, different movements could develop and use messianic theology quite differently. As Wright succinctly puts it: 'messiahship, it seems, was whatever people made of it.'¹⁰

Messianic theology was, however, in all of its forms, first and foremost about the restoration of Israel as the people of God. The new age spoken of in texts like Isaiah 40-55 was a hope that was alive and kicking and is picked up and used by many writings from the period. What this means, fundamentally, is that *messianic beliefs were eschatological beliefs*.¹¹ To hope for any form of messianic figure was to hope for God to restore and to save his people: in other words that the eschatological promises in texts like Deutero-Isaiah would come to pass. Anybody using messianic language or imagery would be bound to be understood within this kind of framework.

4. Jesus' preaching and praxis

So did Jesus work with this theme of YHWH intervening to restore the fortunes of his people. Traditionally, this question has often been tackled by looking at the theme of 'the Kingdom of God' in Jesus' preaching, a phrase that many scholars think is better translated 'the reign / rule of God.' It is certainly a major theme for Jesus, the phrase ἡ βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ occurring 52 times in the Gospels (82 if one includes the Matthean periphrasis 'kingdom of heaven').

The centrality of the theme in Jesus' ministry and its implications have formed the battlefield on which numerous scholarly skirmishes have been fought. One major issue has been whether, for Jesus, the kingdom of God was something present here and now, or whether it lay in the future.¹² However, as Scott McKnight has shown, the vast majority of scholars today recognise that, in some way, Jesus held together both a present and a future view of the kingdom.¹³ Rather than believing the kingdom to be wholly now, or wholly yet to come, Jesus saw himself as somehow inaugurating

⁹ James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, Christianity in the Making Vol. 1, (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2003) 618-619.

¹⁰ Wright, *Jesus*, 482.

¹¹ One of the difficulties in deploying the word 'eschatology' in New Testament studies is the myriad ways that word has been used and misused. G. B. Caird, *The Language and Imagery of the Bible*, (London: Duckworth, 1980) 243-271 identifies 5 main ways in which the word had been used and adds two more. When I ascribe eschatological beliefs to Jesus, I am particularly using the word in the sense which Caird called eschatology^{p(urpose)} and I am arguing that Jesus believed YHWH had a plan, a purpose for his people and for the world which he would work out *within* history.

¹² Wright, *Jesus*, 471 wryly comments that whether scholars think the kingdom is present or future largely depends on what they think the kingdom is. For Weiss and Schweitzer, the kingdom was clearly future, God's powerful reign waiting to imminently sweep in and bring an end to history. Whereas for Dodd, reacting against this view, but also operating under the influence of a liberal Protestantism which wanted to cast the kingdom as a social ethic, Jesus believed the kingdom was fully present, realised in his own ministry of teaching and healing (C. H. Dodd, 'The Kingdom of God has Come', *Expository Times* 48 (1936-1937))

¹³ Scot McKnight, *A New Vision for Israel*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1999) 75-77.

the kingdom,¹⁴ this enables one to hold together the tension of future-orientated texts¹⁵ and those with a present-focus.¹⁶

5. The kingdom breaks in

That Jesus saw the kingdom as breaking into history in some way through his ministry is nothing short of remarkable and texts like Mt. 12:28//s and Mt. 13:16-17//s are particularly staggering when read against typical Second Temple Jewish hopes. This is why the ability to paint the background to Jesus' ministry is so vital. For example, Isaiah could look forward to the blessings of God's reign and the writer of Psalms of Solomon 17 could do likewise, describing those who would see such days as blessed (PssSol 17:50). Yet Jesus implied that those blessings were available now, that those who lived during his ministry were the ones who were blessed, and he saw himself as the decisive agent in the realisation of those blessings.¹⁷

6. Healings, exorcisms and 4Q521

Inseparably bound up with Jesus' preaching of the kingdom are his miracles and exorcisms, for it seems to be the case that it was precisely through them that the present nature of the kingdom was demonstrated.¹⁸ This connection is seen particularly clearly in Mt. 11:2-6//s, the double-tradition passage in which John, incarcerated in prison, sends his disciples to Jesus to ask what he is up to.¹⁹ Jesus responds by pointing to the miracles he is doing: the blind see, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed. In other words, the kinds of deeds that Deutero-Isaiah (61:1-3) listed as signs of God's eschatological reign, Jesus pointed to in order to reassure John. And Jesus was not alone in drawing these kind of connections; the Qumran text 4Q521 also draws on Isa. 61:1-3 to describe the deeds that God will carry out through his messiah:

The Lord will consider the pious, and call the righteous by name and his spirit will hover upon the poor, and he will renew the faithful with his strength. For he will honour the pious upon the throne of an eternal kingdom, freeing prisoners, giving sight to the blind, straightening out the twisted ... He will heal the badly wounded and will make the dead live, he will proclaim good news to the poor.²⁰

¹⁴ Many scholars have increasingly seen the wisdom of following the likes of Fuller and Kümmel in seeing the kingdom as breaking into history through, or operative in advance through Jesus' ministry. See R. H. Fuller, *The Mission and Achievement of Jesus*, (London: SCM, 1954) 20-49; W. G. Kümmel, *Promise and Fulfilment: The Eschatological Message of Jesus*, (London: SCM, 1957) 141-155. See also Ladd, *Presence of the Future*; and Jeremias, *Parables of Jesus*. Also Beasley-Murray, *Jesus and the Kingdom of God*.

¹⁵ e.g. Mk. 1:15//s; Mk. 9:1//s; Mk. 9:47//s; Mk. 13//s; Mk. 14:25//s; Mt. 8:11-12//s; Mt. 5:3-12//s; Mt. 6:9-13//s; Mt. 8:11-12//s/

¹⁶ Mk. 2:18-22//s; Mk. 3:22-27//s; Mt. 12:28//s; Mt. 13:16-17//s; Lk. 14:15-24//s; Lk. 16:16//s. Another factor that helped break the scholarly tendency towards dichotomy was the discovery that the Qumran community also managed to hold together both present and future eschatology with apparent ease; in other words, the option was open to a first-century Jew. See John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, Vol. 3, *Companions and Competitors*, (New York: Doubleday, 2001) 493-495; cf. Gerd Theissen, *The Shadow of the Galilean*, (London: SCM, 1987) 50.

¹⁷ So Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, 695.

¹⁸ As Richard A. Horsley, *Jesus and the Spiral of Violence*, (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993 [1987]) 181 rightly recognises.

¹⁹ That the Isaianic herald (Matt 3:1-3//s) should have doubts about the one whom he announced would seem to be embarrassing enough that the authenticity of this passage is firm.

²⁰ Translation by F. G. Martínez and E. J. C. Tigchelaar, eds., Vol. 2, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Study Edition*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 1045.

Given this kind of thinking in the general milieu then, as Witherington points out, these kind of miracles performed by Jesus would almost certainly have led to the watching crowds drawing messianic conclusions.²¹

Jesus' reputation as a miracle worker was not merely due to his healings, he also seems to have had a reputation as an exorcist. And just as Jesus connected his healings with eschatology in his answer to John's disciples, so too with his exorcisms: Mt. 12:28/Lk. 11:20 directly connects the coming of the kingdom with exorcisms. In the first-century Palestine of his day, sickness was often seen as a work of Satan and several Gospel texts reflect this view (e.g. Mt. 12:22-24//s; Mk. 9:17-29//s; Lk. 13:10-16).²² Thus the healings that Jesus was engaged in were, in a very real sense, a plundering of Satan's domain and a release of his captives (Mt. 12:29; Lk. 4:18; Isa. 61:1). Graham Twelftree remarks that Jesus did not simply claim that his exorcisms meant the kingdom *had* come, rather that the exorcisms *were* the kingdom coming;²³ In short, it was in precisely these kinds of works, power and triumph over Satan that the kingdom was breaking into history.

7. The Restoration of Israel

Third Quest scholars have increasingly recognised that to understand Jesus one needs to recognise that he had a vision for the nation of Israel, just as John did before him.²⁴ We have already seen how Jesus drew upon the hopes set out in passages like Isaiah 40-55 and as Meier helpfully reminds us, this kind of hope was very much a national hope, a hope that YHWH would re-gather, restore and renew his people, Israel.²⁵

In many strands of first-century Jewish thought, YHWH would restore, redeem and lead his people through some kind of eschatological, messianic figure. There are hints of this in Isaiah²⁶ and in Daniel²⁷ and the theme is picked up and developed in the intertestamental period literature.²⁸ His preaching and praxis aside, one of the most powerful pieces of evidence that Jesus did indeed consider that his mission was to restore and renew Israel is found in his choosing of the Twelve and many scholars have been quick to point out this link.²⁹ Symbolising the original tribes of Israel, the Twelve were a prophetic sign by Jesus that restoring Israel was a key part of his agenda.

In short, that Jesus taught that the kingdom of God was coming in and through his ministry, and demonstrated its presence by his signs and wonders, and displayed a concern with the restoration of Israel that echoes the consistent theme in Second Temple Judaism from Daniel and Isaiah onwards.

²¹ Ben Witherington, III, *The Christology of Jesus*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990)175-177. The reaction of the crowds after the feeding of the five thousand, according to the Johannine account (Jn 6:15), would seem to suggest that many people did make exactly this connection.

²² See also Horsley, *Spiral*, 183-190.

²³ Graham H. Twelftree, *Jesus the Exorcist*, (Tübingen: Mohr, 1993) 168-173.

²⁴ See McKnight, *Vision*, esp. 1-14. Contrast the slight confusion displayed by Borg who can't seem to decide if Jesus' concerns were primarily 'spiritual' (*New Vision*, 100) or 'political', concerned with Israel's renewal (*New Vision*, 125). One suspects that this is a dichotomy that would not have occurred to a Second Temple Jew.

²⁵ Meier, *Marginal III*, 152; cf. George B. Caird, *Jesus and the Jewish Nation*, (London: Athlone Press, 1965)5-17.

²⁶ e.g. Isa. 42:1-4; 45:1-2; 49:1-7; 50:4-11; 52:7, 13-15; 53:1-12; 55:4.

²⁷ e.g. Dan. 2:1-45; 7:1-9:27.

²⁸ e.g. 4Q174 chapter 1; 1 Enoch 48:10; 52:4; 4 Ezra 11:36ff; and, of course, Psalms of Solomon 17. See the helpful discussion in N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, (London: SPCK, 1992)307-320 in which he also draws attention to the various messianic movements that Josephus bears witness to. This is evidence that messianism was alive and well in the period, even if different groups had vastly differently understandings of it. Craig A. Evans, 'Messianism' in Craig A. Evans & Stanley E. Porter, eds., *Dictionary of New Testament Background* (Leicester: IVP, 2000) also helpfully points that the New Testament itself is an important witness of first-century Jewish messianic belief.

²⁹ So Charlesworth 136-138; Theissen 105; Horsley 199.

That he also appointed twelve disciples, symbolic new patriarchs, reinforces this concern beyond any reasonable doubt. All this points to a belief on Jesus' part that he was indeed God's agent, appointed to rescue and restore Israel;³⁰ it seems to be the case that Jesus considered himself to be establishing the messianic age.³¹ But it is only when we allow the historical background to bring Jesus' ministry into sharper focus that the full force of this teaching and praxis becomes evident.

8. Further evidences

If we had more time this morning, we could go on to examine further cumulative evidence for Jesus' messianic self-understanding. The so called 'triumphal entry' to Jerusalem, for example, seems to be a deliberate allusion to Zechariah 9:9 and the entry of the messianic king. The cleansing of the Temple, whatever else it symbolised, was probably another action that would have triggered messianic ideas in the minds of those who saw it, since kingship and Temple had been connected since David and Solomon, his temple-building son. Caiaphas certainly saw this point, witness how the trial narratives proceed from questions about the temple cleansing to questions about messiahship. Jesus was also, of course, crucified as a messianic pretender.³²

9. Summary

A thorough survey of Jesus' mission, message and miracles against the background of the first century — i.e. a Third Quest approach — leads inexorably to the conclusion that Jesus did indeed consider he was the decisive eschatological agent, that it was in his ministry that the time of messianic blessing, the eschatological hopes of texts like Deutero-Isaiah would break into history. It was a deeply Jewish hope, one steeped in the thinking of the period, and one that was thoroughly Israel-centric in its focus.

10. Methodology

In terms of methodology, then, we have explored a historical approach to Jesus, utilizing the plethora of sources we have available for the first-century. There are three key observations I want to make about such an approach:

- It reveals that the world painted by the gospels is extremely accurate. The politics, society, religious, geography that is portrayed in them fits what we know from elsewhere.
- The Jesus revealed in the Gospels is a first-century Jew; in other words, he fits his historical context like a glove. This should not be a surprise, historically or doctrinally, but is important — if, for example, the Gospels were invented years later as pious fictions, we would not expect this kind of historical fit.
- Above all, the Jesus revealed by a sensitive historical investigation broadly coheres with what we might call the "Jesus of faith". Too often the Church has been guilty of separating faith from history, a Kantian split that is alien to the Gospels. Yet a "flight from history", as

³⁰ Witherington, *Christology*, 143 argues that just as Jesus considered himself God's final eschatological agent, he appointed the Twelve as his *own* agents.

³¹ Charlesworth, *Jesus within Judaism*, 155.

³² Bammel has argued that when it comes to the *titulus*, for example, we are on very solid ground indeed and that ground is deeply political — Jesus was crucified on the charge of being a messianic pretender; see Ernst Bammel, 'The Titulus' in E. Bammel & C. F. D. Moule, eds., *Jesus and the Politics of His Day* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984). Indeed, as Hengel points out, so saturated with politics is the whole trial and execution that it was clearly not an invention of the early church; it would have been far too dangerous; see Martin Hengel, *Was Jesus a Revolutionist?*, (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971) 15.

Dunn calls it,³³ is not necessary. In the test case we have explored — the question of Jesus’ messianic self-understanding, history reveals just how deep this vocation ran for Jesus, colouring not his preaching, but his miracles and his exorcisms. But it also reminds us that it was a first-century shaped messianic vocation, one, for example, in which Israel as the people of God figured centrally.

II. Jesus in the Qur’an

Before we turn to ask similar historical-critical questions about Muhammad, a word about Jesus in the Qur’an by way of contrast with the Gospels. Jesus appears in just over 90 verses of the Qur’an in a fairly skewed presentation, in that by far the largest two sections about him are infancy narratives. A few summary lists of his miracles appear. And, thirdly, Jesus in the Qur’an is inserted into polemic contexts, with words intended to rebut or correct Christian faith placed into his mouth.³⁴

The crucial thing to notice in all of this is that there is a complete absence of any of the Jewish theology and thinking that we saw when examining the historical Jesus. Not only that, but there is no hint of the first century context, either. For example, no place names are mentioned — Jesus is not connected with Bethlehem, Jerusalem, Nazareth or Galilee. The politics of the day are not described and key people like Herod Antipas, Herod the Great, Caiapas the High Priest, Pilate and Caesar himself are absent.

The reason for this is simple: the Jesus of the Qur’an serves an entirely different purpose. Firstly, the qur’anic placement of Jesus firmly in the prophetic line serves two functions. Firstly, it relativises him, robbing him of exclusive Christian claims and portraying him instead as simply bearing the same message as previous prophets.³⁵ Secondly, rather than portray Jesus as pointing to himself, the Qur’an makes him a forerunner to Muhammad.³⁶ Jesus thus becomes a type of Muhammad: both are called *nabi*, *rasul* and *abd*; Jesus gets the *injl*, Muhammad the Qur’an; both declare some previously forbidden things permissible (3:50/6:146); both perform *salat* and *zakat* (19:31); the disciples of Jesus are called Muslims (5:111). In short, the qur’anic Jesus legitimates Muhammad’s prophethood.³⁷

Above all, it is important to recognise that the qur’anic Jesus is largely defined in reaction to the Christians of the day; many verses are concerned with correcting Christian belief about him and asserting that Jesus is not God’s Son. This polemical focus makes Jesus unique among qur’anic prophets. As the Muslim scholar Tariq Khalidi puts it:

[Jesus] is in fact an argument addressed to his more wayward followers.³⁸

The net result of this is to abstract Jesus from his first-century Jewish context.³⁹

³³ Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, 67-97.

³⁴ See the summary of the qur’anic presentation of Jesus in Appendix 1.

³⁵ Tarif Khalidi, *The Muslim Jesus*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001) 11.

³⁶ e.g. Neal Robinson, ‘Jesus’, EQ vol. 3, 17; G. C. Anawati, ‘Isa4’ in E. Van Donzel, ed., *EF* 1978) 82; Kenneth Cragg, *Jesus and the Muslim*, (London: Allen & Unwin, 1985) 26; William E. Phipps, *Muhammad and Jesus*, (London: SCM, 1996) 92.

³⁷ Neal Robinson, *Christ in Islam and Christianity*, (London: Macmillan, 1991) 37.

³⁸ cf. Khalidi, *Jesus*, 16.

³⁹ cf. Cragg, *Jesus*, 17.

II. Conclusion

To conclude: the Jesus of the Gospels is a historical viable presentation, given what we know of the first-century Jewish context. We have a wealth of good, primary sources to enable us to reconstruct that time period and to see not only how the Jesus painted by the Gospels fits it, but how we can learn more about him when examined against that background. In contrast, the Qur'an knows nothing of this first-century context and relocates Jesus to the seventh century, using him for its own polemic purposes. If the Jesus of Islam is a non-historical figure, what then of that other great prophet of Islam, Muhammad himself?

APPENDIX I

A Summary of the Qur'anic Presentation of Jesus

In examining the Qur'anic Jesus, the question of methodology is important. Christians have often read the Qur'an through an explicitly Christian lens, seeking points of contact between the Qur'anic Jesus and the Jesus of the Gospels. Yet this is fundamentally flawed, for as Räsänen argues, one should read the Qur'an on its own terms.⁴⁰ Therefore we will adopt a synoptic approach, constructing a composite picture of the Qur'anic Jesus from the approximately 90 verses which mention him.

The grandmother of Jesus dedicated Mary before she was born to serve Allah (3:35) and Mary was accepted for this task despite her being female (3:36). She was overseen by Zachariah who was amazed to find Mary miraculously provisioned with food whenever he visited her (3:37). Around this time, the angels appeared to Mary and announced to her the birth of Jesus (3:42-46; 19:16-19). Mary was very surprised since no man had touched her (3:47a; 19:20). However she was assured that Allah can create whatever he desires (3:47b; 19:21). The angels told Mary about the mission of Jesus: he would be a Messenger to the Children of Israel and given miracles to support his message (3:49).

Eventually the time came for Mary to give birth and she retired to a remote place (19:22), eventually coming to rest under a palm tree (19:23). Tired and distressed, hungry and thirsty, Mary was blessed with water and dates, the provision of which may have been a miracle performed by the infant Jesus (19:24-26). Returning to her people, they were understandably shocked that she had given birth despite having no husband (19:27-28). But the infant Jesus leapt to her defence, miraculously speaking from the cradle to vindicate the charges of unchastity that were being levelled at his mother (19:29-31).

When it comes to the actual ministry of Jesus, there is considerably less information.⁴¹ Two lists in 3:45 and 5:110 refer to his miracles, which consisted of healing lepers, curing the blind, raising the dead, animating clay birds, and soothsaying. There is also the mysterious incident of the table from heaven that Jesus called down at the request of his disciples (5:110-115). His miracles were

⁴⁰ Cited in Oddbjørn Leirvik, *Images of Jesus Christ in Islam*, *Studia Missionalia Upsaliensia* LXXVI, (Uppsala: Swedish Institute of Missionary Research, 1999) 32-34.

⁴¹ Most notable among the omissions are perhaps the parables. See the comments in Phipps, *Muhammad and Jesus*, 92.

provided by Allah⁴² to validate his preaching (5:110), a message that consisted of repeating what the previous prophets had said and making lawful some things that had previously been forbidden (3:50).

Despite the continuity of his message with what had gone before (2:87) and the clear miracles that supported it, Jesus faced considerable opposition (5:78). However, Allah strengthened him with the Spirit (2:253) and Jesus called disciples to help him with his mission (3:52). We are not told the nature of this opposition, only that the plots of his opponents (3:54) climaxed in the attempt by the Jews to crucify him, a fate from which Allah vindicated him (3:55; 4:157-159).

The Qur'an is also concerned with asserting right belief about Jesus. Firstly, his place in the line of prophets is repeatedly stressed. Jesus was a prophet like Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Moses before him (2:136; 3:3; 4:163; 42:13).⁴³ He also predicted the coming of a future messenger who would continue the prophetic line (61:6).⁴⁴ His humanity is heavily underlined, the Qur'an being especially concerned with correcting what it perceives as the doctrinal excesses of the Christians concerning him (3:59; 5:72-75). Jesus is not the Son of God, rather he is just a servant of Allah (4:172).

Although the Qur'an is concerned to put Jesus in his place, it also uses some lofty language to describe him. Jesus is the Messiah (4:157), a word (3:45) and a spirit from God (4:171).⁴⁵ He and his mother *together* constitute a sign (21:91) for humanity.⁴⁶ There are also hints at what may be some kind of eschatological role for Jesus; not only are we told he will rise again (19:33), but Q. 43:61 suggests he is 'a sign for the hour.'⁴⁷

⁴² Note the 'by his leave' of 3:49.

⁴³ Robinson, *Christ*, 136: '[I]n the Qur'an the story of Jesus serves, like all the stories of the other prophets, to authenticate the prophetic ministry of Muhammad and to emphasise the authority of the message of which he is the mediator.'

⁴⁴ Neal Robinson, 'Jesus' in Jane Dammen McAuliffe, ed., *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'a4n* (Leiden: Brill, 2003) 17, notes the points of contact between Jesus' ministry and Muhammad's — (i) similar experiences, e.g. sent as a mercy, needed food, had helpers, suspected of sorcery, rejection etc.; (ii) Muhammad inspired in the same way as those who came before, including Jesus (4:163; 42:13); (iii) Jesus foretold Muhammad (61:6).

⁴⁵ It is in this area more than any other where some have been tempted to build Christian theological edifices; see the warning in Cragg, *Jesus*, 33.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 25 notes that the Qur'an does not connect his miracles with the fact of his being a 'sign'.

⁴⁷ Some commentators have suggested the *hu* could possibly refer to the Qur'an as the sign for the Hour. But given that the preceding verses have been concerned with Jesus (note the *huwa* of v59 which is clearly Jesus) it seems safer to say that it is Jesus who is the sign of v61.

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