

# Islam's Jesus



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## Introduction

After September 11, 2001, the world, particularly the Western world, witnessed a tremendous rise in interest in Islamic studies, including works about what Muslims believe and practice. This book explores one of the most important themes of Islamic theology: Jesus and his role in this tradition. Not many people in the West comprehend how Jesus is understood by Muslims generally, nor do they understand the role of Jesus in the Qur'an. After one of my lectures to an audience of about seventy people, I discovered that only one person in the audience knew that a chapter of the Qur'an was named after Mary, the mother of Jesus. A similar experience occurred when I presented a lecture about Jesus in Islam to a different audience. I found that only about 10 percent of the audience knew that Jesus was a prominent messenger of God in Islam, and only 2 percent knew that Muslims believe in Jesus's eschatological descent, or the return of Jesus. The media coverage of Reza Aslan's book *Zealot*, which equates Aslan's Jesus with Islam's Jesus, drives home this point further. The book is about the historical Jesus and has nothing at all to do with the Islam's Jesus, who, as I hope to show in this book is, in reality, not at all dissimilar from Christianity's Jesus.

Even among Muslims, it is not well known that there are diverse interpretations of references to Jesus in the Qur'an and the Hadith, a fact that can provide inspiration for pluralism. The present work aims to illuminate Islam's rich theological engagement with the figure of Jesus; work of this nature can lay the groundwork for Muslim-Christian dialogue. The focus of this book involves many questions for both Muslims and Christians. How does the Qur'an speak of Jesus? What is the place of Jesus in Islamic theology? What do Muslims believe about the coming of Jesus at the end of time? Can beliefs about Jesus provide common ground for Muslims and Christians? What is the Islamic approach to dialogue between Christians and Muslims?

It is important to note that as a scholar, I am trained in classical Islamic theology, which is composed of three major themes: divinity, prophethood, and

eschatology. My training, more specifically, is in eschatology. Eschatology is the study of things related to the end times and the afterlife. Among Muslim theologians, there is no doubt that Jesus is an important figure in Islamic eschatology. Almost all manuals of Islamic theology contain a statement that includes the words “and we believe in the descent of Jesus.” For me, this is both interesting and challenging. How an individual could descend from heaven to earth is a perplexing theological problem. This book is a result of my attempts to find an answer to this question. My response is from a Turkish Muslim scholar’s perspective, one that has also been enriched by contemporary Muslim theologians and by my experience working at American Catholic institutions, more specifically teaching courses on Islam and general religious studies courses at a Jesuit university, and by my significant engagement in interfaith dialogue.

Belief in Jesus is one of the major principles of faith in Islam, as he is considered one of the five elite prophets; the others are Abraham, Moses, Noah, and Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon them all. They are called the *ul al-‘azm* prophets, meaning the possessors of steadfastness. Jesus is a messenger of God like his brother Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him.<sup>1</sup> He is so important in Islam that the highest Muslim in rank after Muhammad still cannot reach the spiritual level of Jesus. Jesus is the messenger of God, but in contrast to the traditional Christian teachings, he is not believed to be a part of God or an incarnation of God. This is also true for all other prophets of God. In the afterlife, Jesus is allowed to intercede and ask God to forgive sinners, but he cannot forgive sinners by himself. This is also true for the Prophet of Islam. It is God who forgives the sins of human beings.

In Islamic theology, the limited power of prophets does not negate the fact that Jesus was among the highest of prophets in the chain of prophethood. Islam gives remarkable spiritual rank to the messengers of God but never allows a monument or statue to be erected in their honor. This is mainly a result of Islamic sensitivity to any possible exaggeration of the statues of highly regarded personalities, which could easily lead to worshipping them as deities. In Islam, one should worship only God. It should be noted that, similar to Muslims, some Christian denominations such as the Anabaptists and followers of Huldrych Zwingli (d. 1531) reject the presence of icons in their places of worship. The Islamic understanding of prophethood should not be confused with the term “prophecy” as is often used in the English-speaking world to connote predictions of the future. Similar to many theologically responsible Christians, followers of Islam do not use the term “prophet” loosely. In Islam there are very strict criteria regarding prophethood, and not everyone who speaks about the

future can be called a prophet. A prophet speaks on behalf of God and in some cases meets with the angel Gabriel to receive revelation from God. Therefore, a prophet is an appointee of God on earth, one who declares the message of God to people. Considering Jesus a prophet in Islam is not degrading the level of Jesus; in fact, it puts him among the highest figures in the realm of humanity. Theologically speaking, when Muslims say he is among the five greatest messengers of God, they express their belief that these messengers are the highest throughout human history.

Jesus, as a messenger of God, is an integral part of Islamic theology, literature, culture, and civilization. As I shall discuss in the following chapters, a saying of the Prophet speaks of Jesus's return and of his praying in a mosque with the Muslim community when the Muslim messianic figure, the Mahdi, asks Jesus to lead the prayer. Since the early period of Islam, Muslims have read the sayings of the Prophet, referred to as Hadith, about Jesus and the end-time scenario, finding nothing strange about Jesus's praying in a mosque. Muslims see no incongruity between Jesus and the mosque since the Prophet Muhammad and Jesus are considered spiritual brothers. This clearly indicates that Muslims have honored Jesus as a part of their faith and culture. Perhaps for this reason many adherents of Islamic faith name their children 'Isa, the Qur'anic name for Jesus.

Jesus also has an important role in Islamic eschatology. According to Islamic theology, only Jesus, among all prophets of God mentioned in the Qur'an, will come as a messianic figure with an eschatological role that includes bringing justice and the revival of religion. Islamic theology encourages Muslims to prepare a good environment and participate in the process of end-time restoration. Islam does not accept the idea of waiting for the coming of Jesus without the participation of individuals to make the world a peaceful place. One can argue that Jesus's role in Islamic theology is even greater than the role of Moses or Abraham.

Both the Qur'an and the Prophet of Islam speak extensively of the birth, life, message, and end of Jesus's life on earth as well as his current state. Muslims believe that when Jesus's enemies attempted to crucify him, they could not do it. Instead, God raised Jesus to himself and rescued him from persecution by his enemies. I shall discuss this belief in detail in the following chapters.

His return to earth is not explicitly mentioned in the Qur'an, yet it is highly emphasized in the sayings of the Prophet. His return is among the major portents of the final moment of human history, known in the Qur'an as the Hour or al-Sa'a. This is understood from the body of the sayings of the Prophet as good

news for Muslims. While Jesus's return is known in the Christian tradition as the Second Coming of Jesus, it is described in Islamic theology with the Arabic phrase "nuzul 'Isa," which I translate as the descent of Jesus, usually meaning from heaven. This has no connection to the Christian understanding of Jesus's descent into hell. Etymologically speaking, the word *nuzul* is used to describe both physical descent and spiritual arrival from on high. The same word is used for the coming of the mercy of God, the coming of the rain (which indicates that rain comes from the sky and from the mercy of God), and the coming of angels. Throughout this work, I will consider these nuances while interpreting the descent of Jesus from an Islamic theological perspective. The roots of the term *nuzul* lie in the sayings of the Prophet of Islam, the second most important source (after the Qur'an) for Islamic theology. Some classic secondary Islamic sources have used terms such as "emergence" or "coming" instead of "descent." In prescientific cosmology, these terms were understood literally, but they generally are understood allegorically in contemporary Islamic understanding. As I shall discuss, what is common to all sources is that Jesus's return will happen at the end of time as a sign of the Final Hour.

The Prophet's sayings indicate both minor and major signs of the Hour. Jesus's descent is among the major signs, alongside the emergence of the Antichrist and the rise of the sun from the west. These have been commonly understood by Muslims in a literal way, but they can be understood in an allegorical way as well. The image of Jesus's return in the mind of Muslims is related to Jesus coming from heaven; thus, the word "descent" has been used for Jesus's return in both the sayings of the Prophet and later Muslim literature. Theologically speaking, no one can determine the time of Jesus's descent. The only thing that is known for sure is that the Prophet spoke about the descent, and since the Prophet spoke about it, it is believed as truth. But the texts on the return can be understood in both allegorical and literal ways.

It should be noted that the prophetic remarks on the role of Jesus are all related to this world and not to the afterlife. Present existence in Islam has paramount importance. This worldly life is a test. Thus, the descent of Jesus entails a remarkable struggle jointly performed by Jesus and the Muslim messianic figure in Islamic eschatology, the Mahdi. The realm of the afterlife is where struggle no longer exists.

In the Qur'an, Jesus is mainly characterized by his message, which centers on worshipping the one God. However, in sayings of the Prophet, Jesus is characterized as someone who must come at the end of time as a mercy from God. Jesus will come to bring justice to the world. Muslims understand his coming as

the promise of change in the course of history and as the onset of the establishment of justice. Jesus, with his Muslim messianic helper, a symbol of goodness, will defeat the Antichrist, a symbol of oppression and evil. This Islamic understanding of Jesus's victory over the Antichrist should not be confused with certain Christian concepts of the coming of the kingdom of God, where no evil remains. From an Islamic theological perspective, as long as this world exists as a place where people are tested, it is impossible to fully get rid of evil.

In this work, my perspective is that of a Muslim scholar of Islamic theology who looks at the text in its context using the methodology of Islamic sciences, such as the commentary of the Qur'an (Usul al-Tafsir) and the sayings of the Prophet (Usul al-Hadith). I am inclined to interpret Islamic texts in light of modern scholarship rather than read them simply on a literal level. For the sake of a complete investigation of the topic, I will examine those literalist views and discuss their theological validity. Many Muslims may find my approach very new because it synthesizes classical and modern sources. While limited Qur'anic verses are cited as sources for Jesus's eschatological role, more than 100 sayings of the Prophet can be found in the Hadith collections, some of which are examined in this work. Exploring Jesus as an eschatological figure in Islam also requires a brief discussion of other figures that appear in the same scenario and have strong relationships with Jesus. These figures are the Mahdi, the Islamic messianic figure who is supported by Jesus, and the Antichrist, the evil persona, who is presented in the sayings of the Prophet as al-Dajjal, the Liar, and the stern opponent of Jesus. Also, because I argue that Jesus is pivotal to both Muslims and Christians, the discussion of Jesus's descent necessitates a discussion of the future of interfaith cooperation, particularly between Christians and Muslims, who together constitute more than half of humanity. I hope this study will be a valuable contribution to interfaith dialogue and will enhance understandings in the English-speaking world about Muslims and their faith, including their belief in Jesus.

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My goal in this book is to shed light from an Islamic theological perspective on Jesus as a prominent theme of Islamic eschatology. I am confident that focusing on Jesus as a major figure in Islamic theology will be of interest to contemporary Christians, Muslims, and all people interested in interfaith endeavors.

The book has nine chapters that lay out major elements of Muslim theology related to Jesus and his decent and their implications for contemporary Muslim-Christian understanding. Chapter 1 explores the Qur'anic Jesus and

presents a foundational knowledge of Jesus as a messenger of God. More specifically, it asks whether the descent of Jesus has taken place in the Qur'an. It also examines Qur'anic verses on the birth of Jesus, his attributes, the matter of his death and crucifixion, and his ascension to God. Chapter 2 discusses the eschatological role of Jesus from a Qur'anic perspective. Chapter 3 situates knowledge of future events in Islamic theology and the place of Jesus among these eschatological events as one of the signs of the Hour foretold by the Prophet of Islam. Chapter 4 presents concrete examples from the Hadith literature on the eschatological descent of Jesus. The chapter investigates the sayings of the Prophet through a thorough discussion based on the methodology of Hadith criticism. Chapter 5 explores various speculations about the time and place of Jesus's return, all of which indicate in some way the presence of Jesus as a helper, rescuer, and bringer of justice. The Islamic eschatological scenario of an alliance between Jesus and the Mahdi against al-Dajjal is the main subject of discussion in chapter 6. Chapters 7 and 8 examine the differences between the literal and allegorical approaches to Jesus's eschatological role in Islamic theology. These chapters demonstrate the importance of allegorical understandings of certain religious texts. The final chapter argues that Jesus and his descent in Islam can serve as a common ground for Christians and Muslims, a contribution to broader interfaith dialogue between the members of the Abrahamic family—Jews, Christians, and Muslims—and adherents of other religions.

I have enriched the present work with two appendices from prominent Turkish Islamic scholars, Muhammed Hamdi Yazir (d. 1942) and Fethullah Gülen (b. 1941). The translation from Yazir (appendix 2) is my own and the first available in English. Appendix 1 is an original document provided to me by Gülen, to which I have made slight editorial revisions.

While there are a few books written in English on the place of Jesus in Islam, to my knowledge there are almost no books written in English on the eschatological descent of Jesus in Islam. I hope this work will help fill this gap in scholarship and be a resource for those who wish to explore this material in greater depth. It is my hope that *Islam's Jesus* will contribute to an Islamic understanding of Jesus and will advance the dialogue between Muslims, Christians, Jews, and adherents of other faiths.



## ONE

### Jesus as God's Messenger in the Qur'an

One of the most important aspects of the Qur'an is the inclusiveness of its message. It does not limit the story of salvation to the emergence and later development of Islam; instead, it takes the story back to the beginning of humanity, the time of Adam, the first prophet of God in Islam. The chain that started with Adam continued through many prophets and ended with Muhammad, who is the final Prophet and confirms the absolute truthfulness of all prophetic messages. One of the links in this chain is Jesus, a possessor of steadfastness and one of the most important of God's prophets in Islam.

Islamic theological literature uses several terms for those who are appointed by God to convey His message. One of these terms is *al-rasul*, or the messenger. Linguistically speaking, the Arabic term *rasul* means the person who is commended by the sender of the message to either convey a message or to receive a message on behalf of the sender. Theologically speaking, "*al-rasul* is a human being who is sent by God to convey divine laws to the people."<sup>1</sup> Similarly there is another term used for the prophets of God, *al-nabi*. The Arabic term *nabi* "refers to the one who receives revelation through an angel, or for whom an inspiration comes to the heart or through wholesome dreams."<sup>2</sup> In theological terms, a *rasul* is higher than a *nabi* because a *rasul* receives a special revelation from God through the angel Gabriel; that is to say, every *rasul* is also a *nabi*, but not vice versa. Consequently, Jesus in Islam is both a *rasul* and a *nabi*. It is believed that there had been 124,000 prophets, or *nabi*, before the emergence of Islam. Of these only 313 were *rasul*. Among these were five *ul al-'azm*, the Possessors of Steadfastness. These five messengers of God are the most important of all the prophets and hold the highest spiritual rank of all human beings. In chronological order, these five are Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad. Therefore, Jesus is of paramount importance to Muslims not only because

he was a prophet confirmed by all Muslims but also because he is the closest in the chain of the prophethood of all divine messengers to Muhammad because of his temporal proximity and the fact that he revealed the good news of the coming of Muhammad.

Both Jesus and Mary are very important Qur'anic figures. Some Muslim theologians have debated whether Mary was one of the prophets since she received a revelation from God when angels (Qur'an 3:42–48) or "Our Spirit," the angel Gabriel, gave her good news about her immaculate pregnancy and the miraculous birth of Jesus. Both Mary and Jesus deserve great attention and discussion, but this chapter will focus on Jesus as seen from the perspective of Islamic theology presented in the Qur'an.<sup>3</sup>

The Qur'an honors Jesus as a messenger of God whom Muslims must affirm as God's messenger. The Qur'an criticizes those who deny the divine messengers and says of them, "Alas for human beings, My servants! Never came there unto them a messenger but they did mock him" (36:30). This verse encompasses the stories of many prophets who came to declare the divine message to their people but were mocked while conveying the message of God. Jesus was not an exception. The conclusion one can draw from this is that the Qur'an considers all historical prophets who brought the message of the belief in one God to be prophets of God whether we know their names or not. Thousands of prophets of God may have walked the earth and we may know nothing about their names and locales.

The story of Jesus is one of the most well-known prophetic stories in the Qur'an. Chapter 3 of the Qur'an, "The Family of 'Imran," discusses the matter of Jesus. As we shall examine, this chapter of the Qur'an speaks of Mary as chosen by God; Zachariah's care for her; Mary's encounter with angels; Jesus's birth; his miracles, which are performed with permission from God; the support of Jesus's disciples; and Jesus's "death" and ascension (3:42–64). Jesus is repeatedly mentioned by name in various chapters of the Qur'an. The Qur'an makes explicit connections between Jesus and the message of Islam. Those who were against Jesus were against the Qur'an as well, theologically speaking. Commanding Muslims to declare their belief in the message of Jesus, the Holy Book states: "Say we believe in God, in what is revealed to us and what is revealed to Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, and the Tribes. We believe in the Torah revealed to Moses, in the Gospel revealed to Jesus and in what is sent to the prophets, of their Lord; we make no division between any of them, and to God we surrender" (2:136).

In the fourth chapter, one of the longest, the Qur'an connects the message

of Muhammad to the message of Jesus and other prophets before them. It confirms that what was revealed to the Prophet of Islam was not something unprecedented but that he who was giving the revelation of the Qur'an to Muhammad was the same God who sent the divine message to the prophets before him. Jesus is mentioned as the predecessor of the Prophet of Islam. To indicate the universality of the message of Islam, the Qur'an touches on the history of divine revelation, which includes messengers of God such as Noah, Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, Jesus, Job, Jonah, Aaron, Solomon, and David (4:163). The following chapter further emphasizes the importance of the message of Jesus and its relationship with earlier messages, namely the Torah. Jesus does not reject the divine message sent before him; on the contrary, he accepts and confirms the message of the Torah. He came after all prophets ("We sent Jesus after them" [Qur'an 5:46]), but the closest to him among all prophets is the Prophet of Islam. In the Islamic eschatological scenario, Jesus and the Islamic messianic figure that represents the Prophet of Islam are hand in hand against "the Liar," or the false prophet known as the Antichrist. Both share the final victory over the Antichrist.

In "Mary," chapter 19 of the Qur'an, when Jesus miraculously speaks from his cradle, once again he declares his message to his people that he is the servant of God, that God revealed the Gospel to him, that God appointed him as a prophet, that God blessed him wherever he might be, and that God enjoined him to pray and give charity as long as he lived (19:30–31). The Qur'anic Jesus is a messenger of God to the children of Israel (3:49; 4:157; 5:75). His mission was to proclaim the monotheistic, ethical message of God. The Qur'an also presents him as the one who is supported by the holy spirit (2:87).<sup>4</sup>

Jesus is mentioned in more than ninety verses of the Qur'an. The Qur'anic Jesus is a receiver of divine scripture. God revealed to him a special message, al-Injil, the Islamic name for the Gospel (3:48, 5:46, 19:30, 57:27). The Qur'an refers to the Gospel as a source of guidance, light, and admonition for God-fearing people (5:46). Jesus made certain things that were forbidden to Israelites lawful, such as work on the Sabbath and some dietary items that had been restricted (3:50). Jesus called upon the people to become muslims, with a lowercase "m"—that is, to submit themselves to the will of God (5:116–17). Therefore, Muslims revere the followers and disciples of Jesus for their struggle in the way of God and their support for Jesus. Hence, because of their submission to the will of God, Muslims see them as fellow Muslims.

The Qur'anic Jesus is the Messiah (4:171–72), and his frequently used title, the Son of Mary, is mentioned in thirty-three verses of the Qur'an. In the Qur'an,

Jesus is given at least ten other titles: *al-nabi* (the prophet, 19:30), *al-rasul* (the messenger of God who received a scripture from God, 3:49), *min al-muqarrabin* (of those close to God, 3:45), *mubarak* (the blessed one, 19:31), *qawl al-Haq* (the true word, 19:34), *'abd Allah* (the servant of God, 4:172), *kalimat Allah* (the word of God, 4:171), *kalimat Minh* (a word from Him, 3:45), *ruh Allah* (a spirit from God, 21:91 and 66:12), *wajeeh* (a person of distinction, 3:45), and confirmer of the Torah (3:50). The Qur'anic Jesus speaks as a precursor of Muhammad and consoles his disciples by giving them good news of the coming of Muhammad after him: "Jesus, son of Mary, said: O Children of Israel! Lo! I am the messenger of Allah unto you, confirming what was revealed before me, the Torah, and giving good tidings of a messenger who shall come after me, whose name shall be Ahmad" (61:6). The names Ahmad and Muhammad are derived from the same root, a word connoting "the praised one." According to Muslim theologians, the good news about Muhammad in the Qur'an is paralleled by verses in the Gospel of John, where Jesus speaks of the Paraclete, or comforter (14:16). Historically, Muslim theologians have been nearly unanimous in believing that the Greek word for "comforter" in John's gospel refers to Muhammad. Therefore, Muhammad is considered to be both the seal of the prophets and the fulfillment of Jesus's message.

From a Muslim perspective, theologically speaking, the essence of the message of Muhammad is consistent with the original ethical and pastoral teachings of Jesus. Any difference is due to the different contexts in which the two men lived. According to Islamic teaching, when Jesus came as a messenger of God to convey the divine message, he needed certain social conditions before he could proclaim his message, conditions that would prove its truthfulness. For example, in his time healing was a very important practice in the community; therefore, God supported Jesus with miracles of healing. Jesus was able to raise the dead to life, heal lepers, and give sight to the blind. These were all possible through permission from God, not through Jesus's own power. On the other hand, when Muhammad came to proclaim the same message of God, his society was dominated by the culture of eloquence in Arabic poetry and prose. Therefore, his major miracle was given in the form of an eloquent book, the Qur'an, which invited all composers of Arabic literature to replicate its eloquence.

Muhammad, by bringing his community from idol worship to worship of the one true God, has fulfilled the message that Jesus and all other prophets of God had proclaimed. The Prophet of Islam was able, in twenty-three years, to change the entire Arabian Peninsula and make the divine message dominant

not only in the political arena but also in the hearts and minds of the people. What Muhammad achieved in such a short period of time was unprecedented. The Qur'anic message suggests that when Jesus announced the coming of Muhammad, he was giving the good news of the coming of a messenger of God who would bring an end to the suffering of people and would succeed in teaching about belief in one God.

Jesus's place in the Qur'an as one of the great prophets of God is a highly revered position in Islam. Sunni theologians agree that since the time of the Prophet, the highest people in religious rank after Muhammad in the Islamic community are the four caliphs, Abu Bakr, 'Umar, 'Uthman, and 'Ali, of which Abu Bakr comes first. However, even Abu Bakr cannot reach the spiritual rank of Jesus. Jesus is a prophet and a messenger of God who speaks on behalf of God, while Abu Bakr is not a prophet but a companion of the final prophet of God, Muhammad.

Jesus's proper name in the Qur'an is 'Isa, the Arabic equivalent of Jesus. Medieval Muslim theologians and linguists have developed a sizable body of literature on the terms and names used for Jesus in the Qur'an and on the origin of these names and titles.<sup>5</sup> The name 'Isa is mentioned twenty-five times in the Holy Book of Islam.<sup>6</sup>

While the Qur'an teaches that Jesus was a messenger of God who brought a divine message to humanity, it does not contend that he was God or a part of God. The Qur'an warns people about this: "They are unbelievers who say, 'God is the Messiah, Mary's son.' Say, [O Muhammad<sup>7</sup>]: 'Who then shall overrule God in any way if He desires to destroy the Messiah, Mary's son, and his mother, and all those who are on earth?' For to God belongs the kingdom of the heavens and of the earth, and all that is between them. He creates what He wills. God is all powerful" (5:17).

The word "Messiah" in the Qur'an is a title of Jesus and is not used for any other individual in the Holy Book. The term "messiah" is a common term used by Muslims, Jews, and Christians, but they each apply a different meaning to the term. In the Jewish tradition, the messiah is a job description that includes bringing peace, ending injustice, and securing the return of Jews to the land of Israel. The Islamic messianic figure will also bring justice, prosperity, and peace to the world. However, neither Muslims nor Jews consider their messiah to be divine. In this regard, one can argue that there is an alignment between Jews and Muslims in contradistinction to Christianity. However, by using this title for Jesus, the Qur'an does not make any connection between Jesus and the messianic expectations of the Old Testament.

In the Islamic tradition, to go too far is as bad as falling short. This Islamic theological principle is particularly important with regard to the personality of Jesus. Muslims believe that a group of people went astray because they denied Jesus. Another group of people went astray because they exaggerated the status of Jesus. Instead of accepting him as a messenger of God, they raised him to the level of God. The Qur'anic understanding of Jesus is somewhere between these two. Moreover, one of the roles of Muslims as the followers of the "middle way" is to bring harmony and peace between Jews and Christians who have departed from each other in their understanding of the personality of Jesus.<sup>8</sup> A verse warns that there should be no exaggeration about the nature of Jesus, a servant of God.

O People of the Book! Do not exaggerate in your religion. Do not say anything about God except the truth. Surely, the Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary, is God's messenger and God gave His word through Mary and he [Jesus] is a spirit from Him. Therefore believe in God and His messengers and do not say God is "three." Avoiding this is better for you. There is no doubt that God is but One God. He is too exalted to have a son. Whatever is in heaven and on earth belongs to Him and God is All Sufficient as the Trustee Jesus never disdains to be a servant of God. Neither do God's close angels. The one who disdains the worship of God and becomes arrogant, God will gather them all together before Himself." (4:171-72)<sup>9</sup>

In Islamic theology, Muslims must love Jesus as much as they can, perhaps more than their parents and children, but they should not exaggerate or elevate him to the level of God. This Islamic theological principle applies to Muhammad as well. Despite a general rejection of Jesus's message by his own people, the verses do mention that some pious people from his community followed him and accepted the truth. Twelve verses in the chapter of the Family of 'Imran supplement a well-known birth narrative.

According to the Qur'an, Jesus's message was to invite people to worship only one God, not himself. Jesus says, "Surely God [or Allah] is my Lord and your Lord. So worship Him and this is the straight path" (3:51).<sup>10</sup> Therefore, neither Jesus nor Muhammad can be worshipped. Both are among the greatest worshippers of God.

### Jesus's Personal History and His Message

The story of Jesus's birth is mentioned in two chapters of the Qur'an. Both stories have to do with Mary. Chapter 3, the second-longest chapter of the Qur'an,

is named after the family of 'Imran, or Al-'Imran, the family of the father of Mary and of the father of Moses; commentators have suggested that one of the chapter's main aims is to show Jesus's family tree. Mary's father and Moses's father share the same name but are two different people. Mary's father is known in the Gospel of Luke as Heli, a short version of Eliachim. While this is the name of Mary's father in Hebrew, 'Imran is the Arabic version of Eliachim. Through the use of her Qur'anic title, Maryam bint 'Imran, or Mary the daughter of 'Imran, the Qur'an leaves no doubt about the identity of her father.

The Holy Book of Islam presents Mary as an example for believers: "And [Allah cites an example for those who believe] Mary, the daughter of 'Imran, who preserved her chastity and into whose womb We breathed Our spirit. And she truly believed in the words of her Lord and in His scriptures. She was among the truly devout" (66:12). The verse from which the chapter takes its name, Al-'Imran, is about how the family of 'Imran is chosen by God: "Surely God [or Allah] has chosen Adam and Noah, Abraham's descendants, and the family of 'Imran above [the peoples of] the worlds" (3:33).

Chapter 19, named after Mary, also contains a similar account of Jesus's birth. However, each chapter presents a unique birth story. I focus on the story as presented in chapter 3. For further elaboration and an alternative Qur'anic narrative of Jesus's birth, the reader is referred to chapter 19 of the Qur'an, verses 16–37.

The Qur'an presents the entire story of Jesus's birth in a concise way that assumes the reader's knowledge of the topic. Many of the details are omitted and, as is common throughout the Qur'an, shows the Qur'an's concern for only the most important aspects of the story: that Jesus was not left alone, that his Lord was with him to protect him, that Jesus was not God, and that he was performing miracles with permission from God.<sup>11</sup> The Qur'an also states that this knowledge about Jesus and Mary was a revelation from God to Muhammad, who did not possess this knowledge before the Qur'anic revelation. According to verses in chapter 3, Jesus's miraculous birth was similar to the creation of Adam, who had neither a father nor a mother. Both Jesus and Adam were great manifestations of divine power. God was able to create two human beings, one without a father and mother and the other without a father. Another verse has a clear reference to the power of God: "Surely, the story of Jesus in the sight of God is similar to the story of Adam. God has created him (Adam) from soil and then said to it 'be' and it has become" (3:59). In his commentary on this verse, Mahmud bin 'Umar al-Zamakhshari (d.

1144), a linguist and well-known commentator on the Qur'an, remarks that the miraculous case of Jesus was similar to that of Adam and suggests that the creation of Adam was even more miraculous since he was created with neither father nor mother. What is common between Adam and Jesus in this regard is that both creations defy natural laws: "That is to say, both are created outside of the current laws of human reproduction. They both are similar in this sense. And creation without a father or mother is more miraculous and in greater defiance of the laws of nature than the creation of a human being without a father. Here a miracle is compared to something more miraculous to strengthen the argument [that Jesus is not God] and silence the opponent."<sup>12</sup> Thus, neither Adam nor Jesus is considered a deity in Islam. If creation without a physical father made Jesus a deity, Adam would have been considered a deity. The Qur'anic logic concludes that there is only one God, the most powerful. Other than Him, no one can claim to be a deity.

Because of the Qur'an's reference to Jesus's birth without a human father, the tradition records that the second caliph, 'Umar, was angry at a man who had a son named 'Isa and called himself Abu 'Isa, or the father of Jesus. Muslims often name their children after prophets mentioned in the Qur'an, particularly Jesus. Abu Dawud, one of the collectors of the sayings of the Prophet, narrates that 'Umar rebuked the man and said: "Is it not enough for you to name yourself Abu 'Abdillah, the father of the servant of God?"<sup>13</sup> 'Umar does not mention a reason for his rebuke, but it is evident from the reference to "the servant" that 'Umar was sensitive to the possible denigration of Jesus, who had no human father.

Prior to revealing the birth of Jesus, the Qur'an speaks of Mary and how she was chosen among all the women of the world and purified: "And remember when angels said to Mary: surely Allah has chosen you, purified you and elevated you over all women of the world. O Mary, worship your Lord, prostrate, and bow down with those who bow down before God in their worship." The verse goes on: "This is the news from the realm of the unseen that We reveal to you, O Muhammad. You were not with them when they were casting lots on who would be the guardian of Mary, and you were not with them when they were quarrelling" (3:42-45). According to the Qur'an narrative of the story of Mary, many people wanted to be her guardian. The prophet Zachariah, who was a prominent messenger of God according to Islam, was the most pious of those who wanted to take care of Mary. He and the others cast lots by throwing arrows into the Jordan River. The arrows of the others fell into the water and went down with current, but God made Zachariah's arrow stand up. This was a



sign that Zachariah won the contest and that it was God's will. Zachariah embraced Mary, and she embraced Zachariah.

After emphasizing that this information comes to the Prophet Muhammad from the divine, the Qur'an goes on to speak of the birth of Jesus through a conversation between the angels and Mary:

And remember when angels said, "O Mary, surely God gives you good news with a word from Him, his name is the Messiah, Jesus, Son of Mary. He is illustrious in this world and in the hereafter and he is among those who are close to God. He will speak to people from his cradle, and in his manhood, and he is among the righteous." Mary said, "My God, how can I bear a child when no human being has touched me?" The angels replied, "That is God's command. Allah creates what He wants. When He decrees a thing, He just says to it 'be,' and it happens. God will teach Jesus in book [scriptures, writing], the wisdom, the Torah, and the Gospel." (3:44-48)

In his commentary on Qur'anic verses about the birth of Jesus, Sayyid Qutb, the contemporary Egyptian commentator on the Qur'an who is more well known in the West for his ideas on political Islam, refers to Mary as a "female heroine." He finds her story the most unusual event in human history: "Surely the event of the birth of Jesus is the strangest event that humanity throughout its history has ever witnessed. It is an event like none that has ever happened, either before Jesus or after him." Qutb contends, "Jesus was a mercy to the Israelites in particular, and to all humanity in general. The event of Jesus's miraculous birth leads them to the knowledge of God, to worshipping God, and to seeking God's blessing."<sup>14</sup> It is not unusual to consider a prophet of God as a mercy from God. Like Jesus, Muhammad also is presented in the Qur'an as a mercy to all worlds: "We have sent you not, but as a mercy to all worlds" (21:107). Mary gave birth to such a divine mercy, Jesus.

In the conversation between Mary and the angels, Jesus is clearly presented as a word from God. The term "word" has resulted in two major points of interpretation by Muslim commentators on the Qur'an: the first is the angels' verbal promise to Mary and the second is Allah's intervention in the birth of Jesus by creating him through His word "Be!" The story goes on to present how Jesus will become a messenger of God to the Israelites and how his miracles will prove that he is truly a messenger from God. The Qur'anic Jesus is not illiterate; he is learned and full of wisdom: "And God will teach him the book, the wisdom, the Torah and the Gospel" (3:48). In the following verses, one can also see the core of the divine message to Jesus:

God will make him a messenger to the children of Israel. Jesus will say: "I have brought to you a sign [miracle] from your Lord that I make for you from clay, a sign in the likeness of a bird, and I breathe into it and it becomes a bird by God's permission. I shall heal the blind, the leper, and raise the dead to life. I shall foretell to you [as a miracle] what you eat and what you store up in your houses. Surely in this there is a sign for you if you are true believers. I come to confirm the Torah, which preceded me, and to make lawful for you some things that have been forbidden to you. I have come to you with a sign from your Lord, therefore, be fearful of God and obey me. Allah is my Lord and your Lord. Worship Him. That is a straight path." (Qur'an 3:49-51)

To indicate what Jesus felt at his people's refusal of his message, the Qur'an narrates Jesus's request for help in God's cause: "Who will be my helpers in God's cause?" (3:52). A group of people known as "the white-garbed ones" or the "white-garment makers," who would later be his disciples, said that they would be his helpers in God's cause. They believed in God and asked Jesus to witness their submission to God. Interestingly enough, the term used for them is "*muslimun*," which means "muslims," or those who submit themselves to God's will. The Qur'an presents an example of their prayer, which has been repeated by Muslims since the revelation of the Qur'an until the present day: "Our Lord, we believed in what You have revealed [the Gospel] and we follow Your messenger [Jesus]. Inscribe us among the witnesses [to your truth]" (3:53). This prayer of Jesus's disciples has become a model of supplication in Muslim piety. Muslims repeat this in their regular prayers as well as in their daily prescribed prayers when they read passages from the Qur'an. The next verse begins a new phase of the story, in which Jesus's opponents have gone beyond simply rejecting his message and are plotting to kill him. However, God is aware of their scheme: "And the disbelievers plotted, and God plotted against them. And God is the best of plotters" (Qur'an 3:54). The Qur'an then explains how God rescued Jesus from the plot of his enemies.

### The Concept of Prophethood in Islamic Theology

To understand the place of Jesus in Islam, one should understand the concept of prophethood in Islamic theology. Prophethood constitutes one of the three major themes of Islamic theology, alongside divinity and the afterlife. Approximately one-fourth of the Qur'an discusses the concept of prophethood. Prophets are chosen by God to convey God's message. It is believed that God

sends prophets to humanity to help them with both their worldly life and their afterlife. Perhaps because of this Qur'anic emphasis, Muslim theologians, both contemporary and classical, have engaged the Islamic eschatological imagination and have heavily discussed the concept of prophethood.

It is a principle in Islamic thought that revelation and reason do not contradict but complete each other. Reason, in the Islamic perspective, is a gift from God and must be used for the betterment of individual and communal life. However, reason by itself cannot determine what is false and what is true. For this, reason needs the guidance of revelation. Reason is a key to understanding revelation but cannot replace it. Revelation comes through prophets, and through revelation prophets have contributed to the social and spiritual life of people throughout history. Prophets receive revelations from God through an angel or receive inspiration or even visions. On one occasion the Prophet was asked about the number of prophets that had come to humanity until his time. He said, "They have been one hundred and twenty-four thousand, three hundred and thirteen of which are *rasul*, a big group."<sup>15</sup>

In Islamic theology, the first of these messengers of God is Adam and the last is the Prophet of Islam, Muhammad. God supports prophets with miracles that sometimes defy laws of nature. Some of these prophets and divine messengers are mentioned in the Qur'an by name, including Noah, Lot, Abraham, Moses, David, Zachariah, John the Baptist, and Jesus. However, the Qur'an explicitly states that some of the prophets are not mentioned. On this matter the Qur'anic verse says: "Surely We sent messengers before you [Muhammad], among them those of whom We have told you, and some of whom We have not told you; and it was not given to any messenger that he should bring a portent save by Allah's permission. When God's command comes, justly the issue shall be judged; then the followers of falsehood will be lost" (40:78).

Not everyone can be a prophet or a messenger. Muslim theologians have developed five attributes that a prophet of God must possess: trustworthiness, truthfulness, innocence, the ability to convey God's message, and intellect. Anyone who lacks one of these principles cannot be accepted as a prophet or a messenger of God. Therefore, based on this principle of Islamic theology, Muslims do not accept some biblical stories such as the story of David and Bathsheba (2 Sam. 11:1-4), Noah's drunkenness (Gen. 9:20-27), and Lot's sexual relations with his daughters (Gen. 19:30-35). Such acts, if they were true, would disqualify David, Noah, and Lot as prophets of God. Since the Holy Book of Islam speaks of them as great messengers of God, Muslims consider those stories to be untrue. The stories may refer to other historical figures, but not to the prophets.

Furthermore, if David was not trustworthy, he would not have received the divine revelation of the Torah. The David of the Qur'an recites the Torah in such a beautiful way that even birds listened and mountains echoed his recitation (Qur'an 34:10).

Despite the high position of prophets in the sight of God, none of them are considered worthy of worship. In fact, the Islamic understanding of oneness of God, or *tawhid*, strictly requires that nothing and no one can be worshipped but God. Prophets and saints, theologically speaking, are shining suns of the realm of humanity but not at the level of God or a part of God. They are higher than angels, but they are human beings and worshippers of God. Therefore, when Muslims speak of Jesus or Muhammad as messengers of God, they mean the highest religious rank in the realm of creation.<sup>16</sup>

Beyond just being messengers of God, one important aspect of the prophets' personalities is their mutual friendship. The close friendship between Jesus and Muhammad is emphasized even more. This emphasis leads al-Qurtubi (d. 1274), the Cordovan Muslim theologian and renowned commentator of the Qur'an, to quote the well-known saying of the Prophet: "I am the closest to Jesus in this life and the afterlife." The companions of the Prophet asked him "How?" and the Prophet replied, "The prophets are brothers even though their mothers are different. Their religion is one and there is no prophet between me and Jesus."<sup>17</sup> As evidence of the strong relationship between Jesus and Muhammad, reference is made to the Qur'anic verse that refers to Jesus as the one who gives good news of Muhammad's coming after him (61:6). From an Islamic theological perspective, the Prophet of Islam's real spiritual level is beyond comprehension. His meeting with Jesus during his night journey and his leading of all prophets in prayer in Jerusalem before his ascension to divine presence occurred in a different dimension. In order to understand the personality of Muhammad accurately, one has to remember both his spiritual life and his worldly life together. Thinking of him only as a historical figure is misleading. The following analogy helps us to better understand the two aspects of the Prophet. Think of the egg of the peacock and the peacock itself. One can hardly imagine how such a beautiful array of feathers could initially come from such an ugly egg. That is to say, if we did not see with our naked eyes that the source of such a peacock is such an egg, we might not believe in this fact. Thus, in order to appreciate the beauty of the peacock one has to consider the egg and the peacock at the same time. Focusing only on the egg from which the peacock comes and ignoring the amazing beauty of the peacock is misleading. The human life of the Prophet is like the egg, and his spiritual life is more like the beauty of the peacock. Without

understanding the Prophet's spiritual dimension, it is difficult to understand his spiritual life and close relationship to Jesus and other prophets.<sup>18</sup>

### Foundations of Muslims' Belief in Jesus

The following verses of the Qur'an constitute the foundation of Muslims' belief in Jesus and thousands of pages of Qur'anic commentaries have been written on these verses: "O you believers, say, 'We believe in Allah and that which is revealed unto us and that which was revealed unto Abraham, and Ishmael, and Isaac, and Jacob, and the Tribes, and that which Moses and Jesus received, and that which the prophets received from their Lord.' We make no distinction between any of them, and unto Him we have surrendered" (Qur'an 2:136; for similar sentiments, see also 3:84 and 4:163). As a theological principle in Islam and a part of faith, Muslims must believe in all prophets.

Islam is the continuation of the religion of the prophets mentioned earlier, including Noah, Abraham, Moses, and Jesus (Qur'an 42:12). Its role is to confirm, complete, or, in some cases, correct pre-Islamic understandings. For example, the Qur'an is very clear about addressing the Christian understanding of the nature of Jesus (4:171-72). One can see that the Qur'anic verses referring to the sayings of Jesus are similar to biblical verses, such as Jesus's statement "I ascend . . . to my God and your God" (John 20:17). While many Christian theologians have seen in this text a reference to the divinity of Jesus, Muslim theologians have understood this text as a reference to Christ as a servant of God. "And the Messiah said: Children of Israel, worship God, my Lord and your Lord" (Qur'an 5:72).<sup>19</sup> The Qur'an reminds its readers that some People of the Book, meaning Christians, have exaggerated the nature of Jesus. The Qur'an aims to present a balanced view of Jesus. In the Qur'an, although he is not a deity, he is more than just a religious teacher. He is a great messenger of God whose birth is a divine miracle, and he is appointed by God to convey His message (4:171-72).

The Qur'anic Jesus is the receiver of unique, divine gifts. The Qur'an recounts the divine favors and bounties given to Jesus, but God also interrogates him. God's questions appear in an eloquent verse style that refers to future events in the past tense to assert the certainty of the future event. In one verse, God asks Jesus if he instructed people to worship him, and Jesus responds to God that he did not have the right to do that. Jesus then converses with the Divine and asks His mercy for his people by referring to God's wisdom and majesty. The verse says:

Remember when God said: "O Jesus, son of Mary! Did you say to people 'Take me and my mother as two gods beside Allah?'" Jesus said: "Glory be to You! I cannot say what I do not have the right to say. If I had said it, You would know it. You know what is in me and I do not know what is in You. Surely You are the Knower of all unseen. I did not tell them anything but what You have commanded me to say: 'Worship Allah, my Lord and your Lord.' And I was witness upon them as long as I lived among them. When You caused me to die You remained watchful over them and You are Witness over everything. If You punish them surely they are Your servants. If You forgive them, You are the Mighty and the Wise." (5:116–18)

Sources of Islamic history show some debates between Muhammad and some Meccan polytheists who attacked Jesus. It seems that the Prophet defended Jesus against their accusations. Commentaries on the Qur'an record a debate between Muhammad and 'Abdullah bin al-Zaba'r (d. 636), a poet and one of the unmoved polytheists of Mecca before his conversion to Islam. The debate occurred after the revelation of one of the Qur'anic verses addressing polytheists. The verse says, "You and what you worship are the fuel of hell. Surely you will enter it" (21:98). In response to this verse, using juvenile logic, Ibn al-Zaba'r says, "Muhammad, do not Christians worship Jesus? And you say that he was a messenger of God and a pious servant of God. If he is in hell we are pleased that we and our gods will be with him there."<sup>20</sup> With this, the group of polytheists of Mecca laughed and mocked the Prophet in raised voices. The Qur'an responds that Jesus will not be put in hell, and that instead Jesus is the sign of the Final Hour:

When Jesus, the son of Mary, was given as an example [of an object of idol worshipping by Ibn al-Zaba'r], your people cried out and said, "Are our gods best or is he?" They did not give him as an example but for the sake of argument. They are a contentious people. Jesus was no more than a servant upon whom we have bestowed our bounties and we made him an example for the children of Israel. If we will it to be so we can destroy you and replace you with angels on earth. Surely he is a sign for the Hour. Do not have any doubt about it. And follow Me on this right path. Do not allow Satan to hinder you. Surely, he is an open enemy to you. (43:57–62)

In the following two chapters I will discuss this verse and examine how Jesus is considered a sign of the Hour. Here I will note that as part of the Qur'anic mission to correct pre-Islamic traditions, the Holy Book holds that Jesus was the continuation of the chain of prophethood of Noah and Abraham and their

offspring and that God gave Jesus the gospel as divine revelation. It also states that followers of Jesus invented monasticism to receive the favor of God and that this was something God never prescribed. The Qur'an does not imply that monasticism is a bad thing but indicates that living a monastic life is extremely difficult and goes against the nature of human beings. The Qur'an criticizes Christians who prescribe a celibate life and eventually failed to fulfill it themselves. The verse says:

And We sent Noah, and Abraham, and We appointed the Prophecy and the Book to be among their seed. Some of them are guided, but many of them are ungodly. Then We sent, following in their footsteps, Our messengers; and then We sent Jesus, son of Mary, and gave unto him the Gospel. And We set in the hearts of those who followed him tenderness and mercy. But they invented monasticism—We did not prescribe it for them—only seeking the good pleasure of God; but they observed it not with right observance. So We give those of them who believe their reward; but many of them are sinful. (57:26-27)

This verse praises the followers of Jesus, for in their hearts they have tenderness and mercy, but another verse criticizes Christians for worshipping Jesus and saying that Jesus is the son of God: "That is what they say with their own mouths. They imitate the sayings of disbelievers of old . . . and they were not commanded to worship anyone but God. There is no deity save Him. God is above their claims that idols are partner to Him" (9:30–31).

The Qur'an speaks of Jesus and events that happened in the time of Jesus. The Holy Book of Islam and its commentaries have interesting accounts of events such as his "death," crucifixion, and ascension. It is very important for the Qur'an to speak of these events. This elaboration on Jesus in the Qur'an suggests that he is a part of the Islamic faith and that the followers of the Qur'an should believe in him. In fact, the statement of faith "I testify that there is no deity but God, and I testify that Muhammad is God's Messenger" includes the belief in Jesus and in all pre-Islamic prophets whose message was essentially the same as the message of the Prophet of Islam. This is evidenced when Muslim mystics repeatedly say in their invocations, "There is no deity but God and Muhammad is His messenger." They also say, "There is no deity but God and Moses is His messenger. There is no deity but God and Jesus is His messenger," and so on.<sup>21</sup> The invocation continues with the naming of other prophets. Accordingly, a belief in Jesus is an essential part of a Muslim's faith. In other words, in order to be a Muslim, one has to believe in Jesus and his miracles as mentioned in

the Qur'an. The stories relating to the life of Jesus are an important part of the Qur'anic narrative.

### The Crucifixion and Resurrection of Jesus

Jesus is among the righteous. As a messenger of God and an eschatological figure presented in Islam he is among the leading figures who will inherit the earth: "Surely we have written in the Psalms after the Torah that my righteous people will inherit the earth" (Qur'an 21:105). But despite his opponents' attempts and contrary to Christian belief, the Qur'anic Jesus was not crucified. The following verses indicate that Jesus merely appeared to be crucified while in reality he was not.

And [We, God, punish them] because of their grave calumny against Mary, and because of their claim, "Definitely we killed the Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary, the messenger of God." They did not kill him, nor did they crucify him, but it appeared to them so. Those who are in disagreement about him are in doubt of it. They have no certain knowledge about it, they are following their own assumption. They did not kill him for sure. On the contrary, God raised him to Himself. God is Majestic and Wise." (Qur'an 4:156–58)

In the Qur'an, which contains more than 6,000 verses, Jesus is mentioned more than 100 times with his various titles. It is very interesting that this is the only place where the crucifixion of Jesus is mentioned. As Todd Lawson rightly claims, "The sacred book thus de-emphasizes what is generally considered to be the single most important event in Christian salvation history."<sup>22</sup> The verse indicates that there was a crucifixion but that those who thought that they had crucified Jesus were confused. The difficult part of the verse is the Arabic "wa lakin shubbiha lahum," or, roughly, "but it appeared so to them." That is to say, they thought they crucified Jesus, but in fact they had not. An examination of a few English translations of this part of verse 157 in chapter 4 might be helpful for understanding the overall approach of the translators of the Qur'an.

Mohammad Marmaduke Pickthall's translation is "but it appeared so unto them," while Dr. Mohsin Khan's translation is "but the resemblance of 'Isa (Jesus) was put over another man (and they killed that man)." Similarly, Abdullah Yusuf Ali's translation is "but so it was made to appear to them," while A. J. Arberry's translation is "only a likeness of that was shown to them." Muhammad Habib Shakir's translation is "but it appeared to them so (like 'Isa)." And finally,



Muhammad Asad's translation is "but so it was made to appear to them." Considering the grammatical structure of the Arabic phrase, Muhammad Asad's translation seems to be the most compatible with the Arabic original, but this does not mean the others are wrong. I translate this part of the verse as "but it appeared to them so."

Since the Qur'an clearly states that "they did not kill him, nor did they crucify him," Muslims believe that Jesus was not crucified, that he was raised by God to heaven, and that he is still alive there and will return when God wants to send him. The verse constitutes one of the primary sources for Muslims' belief in the descent of Jesus and his eschatological role. Later the prophetic sayings revealed the ambiguous aspects of the verse, particularly with regard to Jesus's eschatological descent. The next part of the same verse emphasizes the lack of certainty regarding Jesus's crucifixion. Because of this ambiguity, the crucifixion of Jesus has been a matter of debate between Muslim and Christian theologians since the early period of Islam. John of Damascus, an eighth-century father of the Syrian church, responded to the Qur'anic verses on Jesus in some of his apologetic writings. He considers the Islamic tradition a heresy and names the followers of Islam as "Ishmaelites," a reference to Ishmael, the son of Abraham, who is the ancestor of the Prophet. However, it is believed that John of Damascus's knowledge of the Qur'an was considerably limited since he mistakenly mixed the verses of the Qur'an and the interpretations of the commentators on these verses.<sup>23</sup>

Although many Qur'anic exegetes see these verses as leaving room for interpretation, it should be noted that interpretations are not a part of the Qur'an itself. In other words, commentators of the Qur'an are not infallible; they can misunderstand the Qur'an and present some verses in ways that show their limited understanding. In the commentaries, one can find both contradictory views and occasional consensus on certain topics. Differences of opinion are a mercy for the community of Islam, as the Prophet says, and are an integral part of Islamic theology.<sup>24</sup> As for commentary on this particular verse, despite various disagreements on the current state of Jesus, the consensus of the majority of Muslim theologians is that Jesus did not die on the cross.<sup>25</sup> Most Muslims believe that Jesus appeared to die or that the authorities who attempted to kill him were confused and failed to kill him, that God in fact raised him to heaven. A reference from a prominent medieval Muslim theologian, Abu Mansur al-Maturidi (d. 944), serves as a good example of a classical Islamic theological approach to the subject. In his interpretation of the verse on the death of Jesus, al-Maturidi says: "With regard to the part of the verse 'We have killed the Mes-

siah, Jesus the son of Mary, the messenger of God,' for some people there are two explanations. One about the possibility of confusion and their being mistaken in what they witnessed. The second is that even if news is *mutawatir* [that is, transmitted recurrently by reporters], the spread of false news is possible.<sup>26</sup> He goes on to speak of the story commonly narrated among people about the crucifixion of Jesus. "The story of Jesus's death became widely spread but it was a lie; this shows that even a recurrent transmission of a report, a *mutawatir*, can turn out to be a lie and a mistake."<sup>27</sup>

Once again al-Maturidi makes a theological argument. Theologically speaking, a report transmitted recurrently is considered reliable and one can build a belief upon it. If it is argued that the crucifixion of Jesus was transmitted recurrently and therefore the Christian belief in the crucifixion of Jesus is valid, al-Maturidi would argue that this principle of Islamic theology is applied when there is no counteraccount from a higher source, the Qur'an. Because in this case there is a counterargument from the Qur'an, which is the highest authority, this means that there was confusion about the crucifixion of Jesus and that those claiming that Jesus was crucified were not sure, so reports of the crucifixion are invalidated.<sup>28</sup>

Many may wonder about the theological foundations for this Qur'anic approach and the spread of such a belief among Muslims. This belief comes from an Islamic theological principle that God does not allow his elite prophets to be humiliated and tortured by their opponents. This Qur'anic principle proclaims that good is always victorious over evil: "Surely, God protects those who believe. God does not love the treacherous and the thankless" (22:38). This is thought to be the way of God in dealing with his beloved messengers. Accordingly, the killing of Jesus on the cross by his enemies would be incompatible with the overall divine principle of victory for the righteous. Even though God's messengers may be defeated temporarily, according to the Islamic tradition, they will be victorious at the end of the day. This is evident in the stories of Noah, Abraham, Moses, and Muhammad, who struggled and eventually received victory from God against their oppressors. The Qur'an keeps the same logic and standard by adding Jesus to the category of prophets who were victorious against their enemies.<sup>29</sup> While there might be some examples in Islamic tradition of prophets who were murdered, these prophets would not be among the elite. Even further, the Qur'an strongly suggests that the final victory is for the righteous (11:49). If it is not in this world, it will be in the afterlife.

Despite different views on whether or not Jesus escaped death, there is a

near-consensus among commentators on the Qur'an that the phrase "I will raise you to Myself" (3:55) is a reference to the ascension of Jesus, both physically and spiritually. In Islamic theology, three main figures are known for their ascensions: the first is Enoch (or Idris), "We [God] raised him to a lofty place" (19:57); the second is Jesus; and the third is the Prophet Muhammad, whose ascension is partially narrated in the Qur'an: "Exalted be God who made His servant [Muhammad] go by night from the Sacred Mosque [Mecca] to the Farthest Mosque [Jerusalem] whose surroundings We have blessed" (17:1). It is believed that from Jerusalem the Prophet ascended to heaven to see God. This ascension, which is called the *Mi'raj*, takes up a great part of Islamic mystical literature. Since Muslims believe that Jesus is alive in the third level of heaven with other prophets, according to some narratives that take place in the Hadith literature, the Prophet Muhammad is believed to have met with Jesus and other prophets during the Prophet's ascension. Muslims believe that when the time comes, God will send Jesus again to this world. Interestingly, some early Christians have similar narratives of the crucifixion of Jesus. According to some records (for example, Irenaeus's *Adversus Haereses [Against Heresies]*), Basilides, a second-century Gnostic of Egypt, believed that Jesus was not crucified but was replaced by Simon of Cyrene, who is mentioned as Jesus's substitute in some Qur'anic commentaries as well. Gnostic ideas of substitution are also provided in Nag Hammadi documents.<sup>30</sup>

Islamic sources draw our attention to a theory that eventually gained prominence among Muslims. According to this theory, one of the disciples of Jesus voluntarily accepted death in place of his master. This story was related by one of the Qur'anic exegetes on the authority of Qatada, a well-known companion of the Prophet of Islam: "It has been related to us that Jesus son of Mary, the prophet of God, said to his companions, 'Who among you would accept to have my likeness cast upon him, and be killed?' One of them answered, 'I, O messenger of God.' Thus that man was killed and God prevented Jesus from being crucified and 'took him up to Himself.'"<sup>31</sup> Stories of sacrificing oneself for the other, or more specifically a disciple sacrificing himself for the master, are typical in the Islamic tradition of piety. Many disciples of prominent mystics would ask God to give the rest of their life for their master so that the master would live longer and serve more.

With this we come to the questions of Jesus's ascension. Did he ascend? Where is he now according to Muslim theology? How can he survive without eating and drinking if he is alive?

## Jesus's Ascension

The nature of the divine protection of Jesus and his ascension has long been a matter of discussion among Muslim scholars and theologians. Two Qur'anic verses are presented as textual references for the ascension of Jesus.

And remember when God said "O Jesus, I will cause you to die [*inni mutawaffika*, or take you away from earthly life] and raise [ascend] you to Myself, and distance you from those who disbelieve, and make those who follow you superior until the day of Judgment over those who disbelieve. Then your return is to me. I will make the final judgment on the matters that you have been in disagreement." (3:55)

And [We, God, punish them] because of their grave calumny against Mary, and because of their claim, "Definitely we killed the Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary, the messenger of God." They did not kill him, nor did they crucify him, but it appeared to them so. Those who are in disagreement about him are in doubt of it. They have no certain knowledge about it, they are following their own assumption. They did not kill him for sure. On the contrary, God raised him to Himself. God is Majestic and Wise. (4:156–58)

It is evident that the literal meaning of these verses about the ascension of Jesus leaves no space for doubt about the divine protection of Jesus. The position of the Qur'an is clear: Jesus was not killed but ascended to God.<sup>32</sup> But to where did Jesus ascend? It is believed that Jesus ascended to the realm of angels in heaven, or *sama'*, the Arabic word for heaven. *Sama'* in classical Islamic theology is understood as the location in the physical realm to which Jesus ascended. However, it can be understood as a part of the unseen world, as indicated in the story of the Prophet's ascension, the *Mi'raj*. The majority of Qur'anic commentators believe that Jesus ascended bodily and spiritually and that the body of Jesus had an angelic quality. If this is the case, the dimension in which Jesus lives is different than the dimension in which human beings live. Therefore, he does not need food or drink to survive, similar to angels, who are, according to Islamic theology, creatures of God made of light and do not need to eat and drink; praising God is their sustenance.

To elaborate further on the location to which Jesus was ascended, one can argue that the diverse nature of the physical world strengthens the argument that diverse heavens exist as well. For example, even in the physical world one can see many different realms. Fish cannot live in the air, nor can birds live underwater. The theological argument follows that it is possible that an unseen

or metaphysical world that is not comprehensible to our normal human senses exists just beyond this material world. One Muslim theologian describes this material world as an “ornamented curtain” over the world of the unseen. It can be understood from the overall Qur’anic presentation of the idea that since God states that He raised Jesus to Himself, one must not understand Jesus as living in a material or physical world but as instead residing in a realm of the unseen. Because Jesus was a spirit from God, despite his physical existence, his body could be like those of angels. It should be noted that in Islamic teaching, angels are real creatures who are obedient to God and are able to appear and communicate in the form of human beings. For example, the Qur’an states in several places that the angel Gabriel visited Muhammad and other prophets on various occasions. It also mentions that angels appeared to Mary, Abraham, and Lot in the form of human beings.

Here we are challenged by another question: Is this ascension of Jesus a kind of death? The answer depends upon one’s understanding of death. If one accepts different levels of death or understands death as a cutoff from eating and drinking, the answer would be “yes.” The Qur’anic understanding of life and death is different from the common understanding. For example, according to the Qur’an, martyrs are not dead; they are alive and receive sustenance from their Lord (2:154). In this understanding, Jesus has likewise been freed of the conditions of worldly life by his ascension and thus is alive. In commentating on the same line, Sa’id Hawwa’, a contemporary Syrian Qur’anic scholar, suggests that Jesus is alive now. The verse that speaks of the “death” of Jesus may also be understood as referring to “sleep,” as the root of the word used for death in this verse is used for sleep elsewhere in the Qur’an (6:60). Although he expresses certain doubts about its veracity, at the end of his comments, Hawwa’ narrates a story from the Gospel of Barnabas in which Jesus says, “O mother truly, I am telling you the truth, I have never died. God has protected me until the nearness of the end of the world.”<sup>33</sup>

Many commentaries on the verses in question are in line with the prophetic sayings about Jesus’s eschatological descent. According to Islamic theology as understood from the Qur’an and the sayings of the Prophet, Jesus is alive and will descend to earth. Debates over the nature of his descent, whether it is symbolic or literal, have dominated Muslim intellectual life. I shall discuss these debates in the following chapters.