

Who Is The Real Jesus: The Jesus Of The Bible Or The Jesus Of The Qur'an?

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SUMMARY

A comparison of how Jesus is described in the New Testament and in the Qur'an in order to determine which is more reliable.

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Jesus of Nazareth is the most influential person who ever lived. Twenty centuries after his death, he continues to exert his power of fascination over the minds of thinking men and women. Peter Jennings' television special "In Search of Jesus" attracted some 16 million viewers across the country. Mel Gibson's "The Passion of the Christ" grossed 370 million dollars. Dan Brown's book *The DaVinci Code* has been a runaway best seller, exceeding the 100 million mark in some 40 languages. People obviously continue to be fascinated by Jesus.

But who is Jesus really? Is he, as the Bible says, the divine Son of God? Or was he merely a human prophet, as Muslims have been taught to believe? Who is the real Jesus?

I propose to answer that question as a historian. I shall look at the New Testament and the Qur'an as the historian looks at any other sources for ancient history. I shall not treat them as inspired or holy books. Accordingly, I shall not require them to be inerrant or infallible in order to be valuable historical sources. By taking this historical approach, we prevent the discussion from degenerating into arguments over Bible difficulties or Qur'anic inconsistencies. The question is not whether the sources are inerrant but whether they allow us to discover who the historical Jesus really was.

Now in order to determine who the historical Jesus really was, we need to have some objective criteria for assessing our sources. Prof. John Meier, an eminent New Testament historian, lists the following four criteria: [1]

1. *Multiple, independent sources.* Events which are reported by independent, and especially early, sources are likely to be historical.
2. *Dissimilarity.* If a saying or event is different from prior Judaism and also from later Christianity, then it probably doesn't derive from either one and so belongs to the historical Jesus.
3. *Embarrassment.* Sayings or events that would have been embarrassing or difficult for the Christian

church are unlikely to have been invented and so are likely historical.

4. *Rejection and execution.* Jesus' crucifixion is so indisputably established as an anchor point in history that words and deeds of Jesus must be assessed in terms of their likelihood of leading to his execution as "King of the Jews." A bland Jesus who just preached monotheism would never have provoked such opposition.

When we apply such criteria to the New Testament, we're able to establish a good deal about the historical Jesus. Let me discuss just three of the facts that emerge about this remarkable man.

1. *Jesus's Radical Self-Concept.* The Qur'an says that Jesus thought of himself as no more than a human prophet who told people to worship the one, true God. However, on the basis of the criteria, it can be shown that among the historically authentic words of Jesus are claims which reveal his divine self-understanding.

Take, for example, Jesus' claim to be the Son of Man. The criteria of multiple sources and dissimilarity show it belongs to the historical Jesus. Now most laymen probably think that this title refers to Jesus' humanity, just as the title "Son of God" refers to his deity. But that's a mistake. It fails to take into account the Jewish background of the expression. In the Old Testament book of Daniel, chapter 7, Daniel sees a vision of a divine-human figure coming on the clouds of heaven to whom God will give everlasting authority, glory, and dominion. No mere human being could be accorded such status, for this would be to commit the sin which Muslims call *shirk*, giving something which properly belongs to God alone to someone else. Yet this is the status which Jesus claimed for himself. Probably the most famous "Son of Man" saying by Jesus comes at his trial before the Jewish high priest. I quote:

Then the high priest stood up . . . and asked Jesus, . . . 'Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One?'

'I am,' said Jesus. 'And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven.'

The high priest tore his clothes. . . . 'You have heard the blasphemy. What do you think?' They all condemned him as worthy of death. (Mark 14:60-64 NIV)

Every Muslim would have to agree with the high priest and the Council that Jesus is a blasphemer who is worthy of death because he had made himself equal to God.

Not only did Jesus claim to be the Son of Man, but he also thought of himself as the unique Son of God. Jesus' self-understanding as God's special Son comes to expression in his parable of the wicked tenants of the vineyard, which even the radical, sceptical critics in the so-called Jesus Seminar recognize as authentic. In this parable, the vineyard symbolizes Israel, the owner of the vineyard is

God, the tenants are the Jewish religious leaders, and the servants are the prophets sent by God. In Mark 12:1-9 we read:

'A man planted a vineyard . . . [and] rented [it] to some farmers. . . . At harvest time he sent a servant to the tenants to collect from them some of the fruit of the vineyard. But they seized him, beat him, and sent him away empty handed. Then he sent another servant to them; they struck this man on the head and treated him shamefully. He sent still another, and that one they killed. He sent many others; some of them they beat, others they killed.

'He had one left to send, a son, whom he loved. He sent him last of all, saying, "They will respect my son." But the tenants said to one another, "This is the heir. . . . let's kill him, and the inheritance will be ours." So they took him and killed him. . . .' (Mark 12:1-9 NIV)

Now what does this parable tell us about Jesus' self-understanding? It tells us that Jesus thought of himself as God's only, beloved son, distinct from all the prophets, God's final messenger, and even the heir to Israel. He did not think of himself as merely another human prophet.

Jesus's self-concept as God's special Son comes to explicit expression in Matthew 11:27: "All things have been committed to me by my Father. No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal Him." It is unlikely the church invented this saying because it says that the Son is unknowable--"no one knows the Son except the Father"--, but for the post-Easter church we *can* know the Son. So by the criterion of dissimilarity this saying is authentic. What does this saying then tell us about Jesus' self-concept? It tells us that he thought of himself as the exclusive Son of God and the only revelation of God to mankind!

This is really incredible! Yet this is what the historical Jesus believed. C. S. Lewis was right when he said,

A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said . . . would either be a lunatic--on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg--or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. . . . You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon; or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. [2]

2. *Jesus's Trial and Crucifixion*. According to the Gospels Jesus was condemned by the Jewish high court on the charge of blasphemy and then delivered to the Romans for execution for treason for claiming to be King of the Jews. Not only are these facts confirmed by independent biblical sources like Paul and the Acts of the Apostles, but they are also confirmed by extra-biblical sources. From the Jewish historian Josephus and the Syrian writer Mara bar Serapion we learn that the Jewish leaders made a formal accusation against Jesus and participated in events leading up to his crucifixion. From

the Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 43a, we learn that Jewish involvement in the trial was explained as a proper undertaking against a heretic. And from Josephus and the Roman historian Tacitus, we learn that Jesus was crucified by Roman authority under the sentence of Pontius Pilate. According to L. T. Johnson, a New Testament historian at Emory University, "The support for the mode of his death, its agents, and perhaps its co-agents, is overwhelming: Jesus faced a trial before his death, was condemned and executed by crucifixion. [3]

Perhaps the single most egregious historical error found in the Qur'an is its claim that Jesus was not in fact crucified. Not only is there not a single shred of evidence in favor of this remarkable hypothesis, but the evidence supporting Jesus' crucifixion is, as Johnson says, "overwhelming." Those of you who are Muslims need to appreciate that no one who is not already a Muslim believes that the historical Jesus was not crucified. The crucifixion of Jesus is recognized even by the sceptical critics in the Jesus Seminar as--to quote Robert Funk--"one indisputable fact." [4] Indeed, Paula Frederickson, whose book *From Jesus to Christ* inspired the PBS special by the same name, declares roundly, "The crucifixion is the strongest single fact we have about Jesus." [5]

3. *Jesus' Resurrection*. What happened to Jesus after his crucifixion? The majority of scholars who have written on this subject agree that three things happened:

First, on the Sunday morning following the crucifixion, Jesus' tomb was found empty by a group of his women followers.

Second, on multiple occasions and under various circumstances, different individuals and groups of people experienced appearances of Jesus alive from the dead.

And *third*, the disciples suddenly and sincerely came to believe that Jesus was risen from the dead despite their every predisposition to the contrary.

I think that the best explanation of these three facts is that the disciples were right: God had raised Jesus from the dead. This has enormous theological significance. For as the German theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg explains,

The resurrection of Jesus acquires such decisive meaning, not merely because someone or anyone has been raised from the dead, but because it is Jesus of Nazareth, whose execution was instigated. . . because he had blasphemed against God. If this man was raised from the dead, then that plainly means that the God whom he had supposedly blasphemed has committed Himself to him. [6]

In summary, on purely historical grounds, we have seen (1) that Jesus of Nazareth possessed a radical self-concept as the unique Son of God and the Son of Man, (2) that he was tried, condemned, and

crucified for his allegedly blasphemous claims, and (3) that God raised him from the dead in vindication of those claims.

All this is in contradiction to the Qur'an's claims that Jesus thought of himself as a mere prophet preaching a blasé monotheism, that he was *not* crucified, and that he did *not* rise from the dead.

When you think about it, however, this situation isn't really surprising. I mean, which would *you* trust: documents written down within the first generation of the events they record, while the eyewitnesses were still alive, or a book written over 600 years after the events with no independent, historical source of information? Why, even to ask the question is to answer it!

In fact, the Qur'an contains *demonstrably* legendary stories about Jesus which evolved during the centuries after his death. I'm referring to stories about Jesus which are found in the so-called apocryphal gospels--these are forgeries which appeared in the second and third centuries after Christ--and which the Qur'an unwittingly repeats as facts. For example, the Qur'an mentions the story--borrowed from the legendary forgery entitled *The Infancy Gospel of Thomas*--of how the boy Jesus made a bird out of clay and then made it come to life (III.70, V.100-110). Such stories are fictional. Thus, the Qur'an offers us no independent historical source for Jesus.

Historically speaking, then, the answer to the question before us seems clear: the real Jesus is the person described in the New Testament, not the legendary fabrication we read about in the Qur'an.

Footnotes

[1] John Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, vol.: 1: *The Roots of the problem and the Person*, Anchor Bible Reference Library (New York: Doubleday, 1991), pp. 168-177.

[2] C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1952), p. 56.

[3] Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Real Jesus* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1996), p. 125.

[4] Jesus Seminar videotape.

[5] Paula Frederickson, remark during discussion at the meeting of "The Historical Jesus" section at the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, November 22, 1999.

[6] Wolfhart Pannenberg, "Jesu Geschichte und unsere Geschichte," in *Glaube und Wirklichkeit* (München: Chr. Kaiser, 1975), p. 92.