The Islamic Jesus

by Sara Miller in the January 2, 2002 issue

There are many Jesuses, despite the fact that there was only one. Permutations began appearing as early as the first century and have not abated, making efforts to uncover the historical Jesus, the real man from Nazareth, notoriously fraught and conflicting endeavors—as Christians who have tried can attest. The written record is incomplete and contradictory; archaeology can only assist and often merely confounds; scholars must detect and filter the "errors" of early accounts while keeping their own biases at bay. It is probably easier to meet Jesus in one's heart than to find him in the past—a venerable Christian theme, perhaps the most venerable.

More than a decade has passed since the Jesus Seminar published its study of the Gospels purporting to identify the authentic sayings of Jesus from the accumulated inventions of the evangelists. About a third of Jesus' teachings and deeds made the cut, consigning much of what Christians have been believing for 2,000 years to the dustbin of the dubious and the false. What remained of the man Jesus appeared, to some eyes, a little thin. The effect of this effort on the community of biblical scholars was predictable: conniptions, followed by factions. Among the statements declared inauthentic was this telling one: "Who do you say that I am?"

It may be possible to come at the problem from the opposite side—call it the fat Jesus. A study of the permutations themselves won't bring us closer to the historical figure, but what they tell us of our own longings and intentions could be invaluable.

Enter Islam, admittedly an unlikely place to look for answers to the conundrums of Christian history. In the Christian view, however, unlikelihood is the whole point; one dismisses it at one's peril. The portrait of Jesus that comes to us from Islamic literature ought not be dismissed either by traditionalists or by revisionists, despite the fact that this Jesus was himself no Christian at all. He was a Muslim prophet, a wandering ascetic, an exemplary spiritual guide and master—not a god but a man, like Muhammad, bearing God's word—appropriated from Christian history and reinvented for Islamic eternity. One can meet this remarkable Muslim in the 300 or

so known citations of his teachings and deeds found outside the Qur’an. These have been newly collected, translated and annotated by Cambridge University Arabist Tarif Khalidi.

This work, at first glance a tiny scholarly tributary, provides three large services. It offers a likely map of the paths by which Christian legend, including the Apocrypha, made its way into another, younger religion and evolved as testimony to the latter’s veracity. It reveals, almost by the way, the deep theological insights of Islam and the brilliance of its scholars, spiritual writers and men of letters, who put their own faith’s wisest words on Jesus’ lips. And it introduces a Jesus of startling dimension and complexity, at once likable, pitiable, fallible and alarmingly recognizable not as God but as us.

Islam, born some 600 years after Christianity (Muhammad died in 632 c.e.), found its genesis in a world overflowing with Christian lore and wisdom. Much else was percolating in the Near East at that time as well: Judaism, Zoroastrianism, Samaritanism. The stories and testimonies of early Christians seeped into the traditional Arabic literature beginning around the eighth century and were still being added and redacted in the 18th. There are many references to Jesus in the Qur’an, where he is venerated but made to conform rather woodenly to Islamic doctrine (the adoption of Jesus, but not of Christian beliefs about him, was itself a muscular theological feat which Khalidi addresses in his introduction). And it is well known by Muslims that the prophet Muhammad esteemed the prophet Jesus in singular fashion. But it is from the extraneous religious texts—the Hadith, or early Islamic wisdom literature; the biographies of prophets and saints; the devotional works; the Adab, or belles lettres; and various guides to ethics and conduct—that the more intriguing and delightful portrait of Jesus emerges. This is the Jesus of what Khalidi has named the “Muslim gospel.”

The contours of this Jesus distinguish him from the New Testament Jesus in predictable but also novel ways. Khalidi reminds us that in the Islamic version of history Jesus was not crucified, nor did he die for humanity’s sins. In this he resembles the Jesus of the Gospel of Thomas and other apocryphal Christian scripts which accented the mystery Jesus came to reveal rather than his messiahship. Muslims aver that he was absorbed into heaven, but not resurrected. The Virgin Birth is accepted, and Jesus’ mother is celebrated in Islamic art and appears in a few of the sayings. As a Muslim, Jesus speaks God’s word in accord with various attitudes in Islamic belief, among them asceticism (early Islam), mysticism or spirituality of

the heart (Sufism), and alternating sectarian views regarding law, sin, predestination and teaching authority.

As in the New Testament, Jesus speaks both masterfully and humbly. The Islamic sayings are, by any account, surpassingly beautiful. Khalidi alerts us to this in his introduction, but there is no way to quite prepare for it. Their rhetorical elegance ranges from the elliptical (“Be in the middle but walk to the side”), to the terse (“Fine clothes, proud hearts”), to the witty (“Piety is nine-tenths silence, and one-tenth fleeing from people”), to the paradoxical (“You shall not attain what you desire except by suffering what you do not desire”; “One should not marvel at how they were damned, those who were damned, but rather at how they were saved, those who were saved!”) to the poignant (“Console me, for my heart is soft and I hold myself in low esteem”) to the tender and merciful:

It is related that on one of his journeys Jesus passed by a man asleep, wrapped in his cloak. Jesus woke him up and said, “Sleeper, get up and mention God Almighty.” “What do you want from me?” said the sleeper, “I have abandoned this world to its people.” Jesus said, “Sleep on, my beloved.”

There are a number of intact sayings from the Gospels, but even the most familiar images—“salt of the earth,” “eye of a needle”—have been tailored to fit Islamic precepts or glossed with an “acceptable Muslim explanation.” Many of the famous reversals of the New Testament, such as “the last shall be first” or the up-ended expectations of the parables, find their complement in such striking Muslim counterparts as:“If people appoint you as their heads, be like tails.”

Or the incident in which Jesus met a man and asked him, “What are you doing?” “I am devoting myself to God,” the man replied. Jesus asked, “Who is caring for you?” “My brother,” replied the man. Jesus said, “Your brother is more devoted to God than you are.”

Yet it is whom Jesus speaks to, and who answers, and what they say in the Muslim gospel that may most surprise students of Christian scripture. There is, for starters, his special sympathy with the creation (Khalidi terms him “an interrogator of nature”), evident in his discourses with skulls, stones, animals and the dead:

A pig passed by Jesus. Jesus said, “Pass in peace.” He was asked, “Spirit of God, how can you say this to a pig?” Jesus replied, “I hate to accustom my tongue to evil.”

Khalidi explains that the Islamic import of this saying concerns purity (pigs being unclean) and slander, yet he also remarks that the saying could easily have been uttered by the Jesus of the Gospels.

While the caution against speaking ill does seem apt, students of scripture might argue that Jesus did not, even would not, address mere animals in this fashion, being concerned quite exclusively with the human estate. The Gospels do report that Jesus cast out demons from a herd of swine, but what this cure revealed was his command over evil spirits, and it was these he addressed. (There is, however, the Gospel incident in which Jesus speaks witheringly to a fig tree—a somewhat unsettling display of Christ's pique—yet here too the lesson is not in nature but beyond it.)

In his encounters with the dead and ruined, the Muslim Jesus again betrays an intimacy unparalleled in the New Testament:

While on his travels, Jesus passed by a rotting skull. He commanded it to speak. The skull said, "Spirit of God, my name is Balwan ibn Hafs, king of Yemen. I lived a thousand years, begat a thousand sons, deflowered a thousand virgins, routed a thousand armies, killed a thousand tyrants, and conquered a thousand cities. Let him who hears my tale not be tempted by the world, for it was like nothing so much as the dream of a sleeper." Jesus wept.

Sorrow, Khalidi tells us, is the mark of the true Sufi, thus Jesus' tears signal his devotion in that quarter. But what is so startling in this incident is the casualness of the act of "resurrection" and the astounding fact that the skull is imparting wisdom to Jesus and not the other way around. The frequency and depth of the Islamic resurrection stories, which run seductively on in the manner of enchantments long before their theology is exposed, highlights this distinction marvelously. While not himself divine, the Muslim Jesus moves in and out of supernatural realms with extraordinary ease and zeal. The New Testament Jesus does so only deliberately, if not reluctantly. For him who is divine the adventure is on earth, in human hearts.

This pattern of Jesus as pilgrim and disciple, receiving wisdom even as he dispenses it, turns up in several charming exchanges with God, John the Baptist and Satan, in which Jesus is alternately chagrined, rebuked, justified and enlightened. There is this rather mortifying encounter with John:

John the son of Zachariah met Jesus the son of Mary, John smiling of face and welcoming while Jesus was frowning and gloomy. Jesus said to John, “You smile as if you feel secure.” John said to Jesus, “You frown as if you are in despair.” God revealed, “What John does is dearer to us.”

And this corrective from the Almighty:

Jesus passed by a man making saddles who said as he prayed, “O God, if I knew where the ass You ride is, I would make him a saddle studded with jewels.” Jesus shook him and said, “Woe to you! Does God Almighty have an ass?” God revealed to Jesus, “Leave the man alone, for he has glorified me as best he can.”

And this dialogue with the devil:

It is related that Satan appeared to Jesus decked out in pendants of diverse colors and kinds. Jesus asked, “What are these pendants?” “These are the lusts of mankind,” Satan replied. “Have I anything to do with any of them?” Jesus asked. “Perhaps you ate your fill and we made you too sluggish to pray or mention God,” Satan replied. “Is there anything else?” asked Jesus. “No,” said Satan. “I vow before God never to fill my belly with food,” said Jesus. “And I vow before God never again to advise a Muslim,” Satan replied.

Where the New Testament Jesus rejects worldliness and cautions against the evils of possessions, the Muslim Jesus harbors a much deeper disdain for both. In the early sayings he is fiercely ascetical, reflecting that current in Islam and perhaps, Khalidi speculates, in the Christian desert fathers as well. Yet even here, in the struggle to renounce every comfort save that of God, Jesus is himself a work in progress:

Jesus owned nothing but a comb and a cup. He once saw a man combing his beard with his fingers, so Jesus threw away the comb. He saw another drinking from a river with his hands cupped, so Jesus threw away the cup.

If he makes no allowances for the world, however, toward the poor and his followers the Muslim Jesus is generous to the point of indulgence, a trait shared by Muhammad, Khalidi tells us, and by God:

They asked Jesus, “Show us an act by which we may enter paradise.” Jesus said, “Do not speak at all.” They said, “We cannot do this.” Jesus replied, “Then speak only good.”

Although Khalidi does not refer to it, Christians may here recall the Gospel story of the rich young man who asked a similar question of Jesus and was told to sell all he owned and give the money to the poor, a sacrifice that apparently proved impossible as the young man “went away sad.” It is a touching turn that the Muslim Jesus would relax a standard so that his followers could meet it, and it echoes the mercifulness of God who indulges those who glorify him “as best they can.”

G. K. Chesterton once mused that the only thing Jesus hid from the world was his mirth. We could as easily say it was his vulnerability, for while we are told in the Gospels that Jesus weeps, suffers and mourns, we are rarely privy to his inner moods and moments, where helplessness really lives. One of the Muslim gospel’s great themes is Jesus’ human weakness. Where the agony in the garden reported by the Evangelists is compacted into the single terse aside to God, “Take from me this cup,” the Muslim Jesus is more revealing:

Jesus said to his disciples, “Pray God that He may make this agony—meaning death—easy for me, for I have come to fear death so much that my fear of death has made me acquainted with death.”

Whether the New Testament Jesus shared these mortal shivers is, on closer inspection, arguable. Mark and Matthew tell us that he “began to feel terror and anguish,” and Jesus himself confesses, “My soul is sorrowful to the point of death” (Mark 14:34; Matt. 26:38). In Luke his sweat falls “like great drops of blood” (Luke 22:44). But the confession of the Muslim Jesus is almost unbearably frank, his fear for himself so unselfconscious and plainly spoken that in this saying as much as in any other we see how masterfully Jesus’ towering spirit was wedded to his mere humanity by the Muslim scribes. The idea, furthermore, that in mortality lies kinship is, it hardly needs to be said, a major testament of the New Testament.

There is no religion that is not measured according to the works and devotion of its followers. In Islamic literature, a giant of devotional practice and religious conduct was the great Sufi thinker Abu Hamid al-Ghazali. His masterpiece, *The Revival of Religious Sciences*, is worth a side trip for the many citations and thoughtful discussions of Jesus—unique in Islamic literature, Khalidi believes—and also for the poignant accounts of ascetic struggle in which all great Muslims, including Jesus, famously contended. In Ghazali we meet souls in solitude and souls who have denied themselves not only women and wine, but honey and bread. Yet these deprivations stunt neither their longings, nor the objects of their longings, nor their

humanity. Quite the opposite. Ascetic discipline is an attempt to regain one's self, as any "recoverer" can attest. Westerners, who sometimes forget the wages of luxury until they have to pay them, should have no difficulty commiserating with these medieval Muslims. At the very least, in this age of addictions the travails of people wrestling with appetites are not to be mocked.

It might seem that this judicious book, published some four months previous to September 11, could not have appeared at a more inauspicious moment. Even before that date Western sympathies were parched by the fundamentalist mirage: Islam as a shallow pond rather than a fathomless well. Readers may find it impossible, at least temporarily, to resist the urge to glean dark meanings and sinister motives from the words of the Muslim Jesus, or to find in them the seeds of militancy. But people of faith and reason, when they collect themselves, will notice that the Muslim Jesus was recruited to rescue sinners, not dash them to eternal pieces. It is this Jesus, in fact, who resurrects tormented bones in the here and now. For Christians he is a redeemer; for Muslims, a reanimator.

Readers will also discover that the struggle described by today's analysts between an oppressive "medieval" Islam and a democratic and modern one may be the falsest jihad of all. The aforementioned religious reformer al-Ghazali, the physician and Aristotelian scholar Avicenna, the philosopher Averroës, the mathematician and poet Omar Khayyám—all worldly figures of enormous sophistication and learning—were medieval men. Osama bin Laden is a modern one. One could make the case that Islamic history, in particular the temperance, genius and wisdom of its golden age, is precisely what today's fundamentalists have discarded, not what they cling to.

Khalidi does not make such a case, but the classically disinterested way *The Muslim Jesus* traces Islam's complex intentions in its adoption of Jesus is especially felicitous in this regard. The book also gives a revealing overview of the development of Qur'anic exegesis, which turns out to be bedeviled by precisely the same controversies and polemics surrounding critical research about Christian scripture. Khalidi refrains from any attempt to authenticate the Islamic sayings, noting that the Muslim Jesus too is a composite, perhaps even a "fabrication." Religionists might find this tack a bit coy, yet Khalidi seems to appreciate that the proper way to handle someone else's God is delicately.

What the Muslim gospel does offer is Jesus as Islam wished him to be and so made him to appear—a remarkable compliment for one faith to have paid another.

Christians, who in the name of Jesus took the entire Hebrew Bible as their own, are hardly in a position to object. And if and when our current lamentations subside, we may even find, in what is faddishly called “the other,” our brother.