

Who is Jesus for Muslims?

**“According to Islam, Jesus always speaks the truth. The question is how we understand it.”**

[Amy Frykholm](#) interviews Zeki Saritoprak in the [June 7, 2017](#) issue



Zeki Saritoprak. Photo courtesy of subject.

*Zeki Saritoprak's book Islam's Jesus examines the role of Jesus in the Qur'an and in Islamic theology. He has written about many Islamic theologians, mystics, and scholars, including the 13th-century poet and Sufi mystic Rumi and the early 20th-century Turkish Muslim scholar Bediüzzaman Said Nursî. A professor of Islamic studies at John Carroll University in University Heights, Ohio, he has been involved in interfaith dialogues, including the Catholic-Muslim dialogues cosponsored by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and the Islamic Society of North America. His book Islamic Spirituality: Theology and Practice for the Modern World will be published in November.*

### **Who is Jesus in Islam?**

In Islam, Jesus, peace and blessings be upon him, is one of the five greatest messengers of God who are collectively known as the *'Ul al-Azm* or the Possessors of

Steadfastness. Jesus is also a real person who lived in Roman Judea in the first century of the Common Era. Muslims share with Christians most of the basic outlines of Jesus' story, though there are certainly differences. In Islam, as well as in Christianity, Jesus was born to the Virgin Mary and was without a father. But for Muslims, Jesus is neither God nor the Son of God.

Like all messengers of God in Islam, Jesus came to his people with a message. Jesus' message is called the *Injil*, or the gospel. As in the Christian tradition, he is a miracle worker and a healer. He gave sight to the blind and brought the dead back to life. The Qur'an has additional miracles ascribed to Jesus. For example, Jesus speaks from his cradle and makes a bird out of clay and breathes into it to turn it into a real bird.

### **What is the significance of these additional miracles?**

These miracles each occur for a specific purpose. Let's take the example of Jesus speaking from his cradle. After he was born, Mary took the baby Jesus to her people, but they accused her of adultery. They said, "Mary, you have committed a terrible thing." Without speaking, Mary pointed to the baby as if to say, Do not ask me, ask the baby. The people asked how they could speak to a baby; Jesus then started speaking.

According to the Qur'an, Jesus said, "I am indeed the servant of God. He has given me the Book and made me a prophet. He made me blessed wherever I am and advised me of prayer and charity as long as I live. He made me kind to my mother and never made me arrogant or disobedient."

Beyond believing Jesus is one of the five elite messengers of God, Muslims believe that Jesus will return to bring justice to the world. Muslim theologians call this "the descent of Jesus" to earth. This eschatological return of Jesus is unique among the prophets of God.

### **How does Jesus' return figure into Islamic eschatology?**

Some say that Jesus will literally and physically descend from the sky and lead a great battle against *ad-Dajjal* or the Antichrist. Others understand this allegorically, which is the approach I prefer and one that I think is more in keeping with the spirit of the Qur'an and the words of the Prophet of Islam. Some of the most interesting and productive interpretations relate Jesus' coming down to the strengthening of

spirituality. I also see this as a sign of alliance between Christians, Muslims, and Jews. But there is a lot of complexity in this area of Islamic theology.

### **Why is Mary, the mother of Jesus, so important to the Qur'an?**

Mary is the only woman mentioned by name in the Qur'an, and chapter 19 is named after her. Her father and mother are mentioned as virtuous people. According to the Qur'an, her mother was a constant worshiper and asked God to give her a son so that she could dedicate him to the temple. God accepted her prayer but did not give her what she wanted. Instead, he gave her Mary, who would be the mother of Jesus.

In Islam, the birth of Jesus is considered miraculous and the only such example in human history. Some Qur'anic verses tell us that God revealed his message to Mary but told her that when her people asked her about her baby she would remain silent. Because of this divine revelation, some Muslim theologians consider her a prophet of God. The Prophet of Islam describes her as the highest woman in paradise, literally the master of the women of paradise.

### **What is the meaning of *Messiah* in Islam?**

Interestingly, out of all prophets and messengers of God, Jesus is the only messenger who received the title of *al-Masih*, or Messiah, in the Qur'an. The term can be translated as the Anointed One. The root of the word has something to do with touching: *mash* means to touch. This is related to Jesus' touching when he would heal people afflicted with various diseases. *Al-Masih* also refers to the eschatological purpose of Jesus, his coming at the end of time. But much of the discussion of Jesus' eschatological purpose is found in the Hadith literature and not in the Qur'an itself.

### **Why is it important for Christians to understand who Jesus is in Islam?**

By understanding who Jesus is in Islam, Christians might find common ground with Muslims. The similarities of Jesus in Islam and in Christianity—for instance, Jesus' miracles and his birth to the Virgin Mary—may be of more importance than what divides Christians and Muslims.

**In your book you say that in Islam the “comforter” of John 14:16—who Christians understand to be the Holy Spirit—is interpreted to be Muhammad. Is there a place for the Holy Spirit in Islam? How is God’s**

## **continuous presence known?**

“Muslims believe that Jesus will return to bring justice to the world.”

The Holy Spirit is mentioned several times in the Qur'an. The second chapter of the Qur'an, for example, says that God supported Jesus with the Holy Spirit. Muslim commentators are split on the meaning of Holy Spirit. Some have said that it refers to the angel Gabriel. A group of early Muslim scholars thought that when the Qur'an refers to the Holy Spirit, it means the gospel. In this reading, God supported Jesus with the power of the gospel. Thus the Qur'an and the gospel are "*ruh Allah*" or the spirit of God.

Another group of early scholars understood it as the greatest divine name through which Jesus was able to bring the dead to life. Other interpretations have said it is "the pure spirit of God," while still others have said that it is a feeling of the presence of God. The difference of opinion on the topic attests to its importance as one of the most powerful concepts in the Qur'an.

**How does interfaith dialogue continue after one party says, "Jesus was not divine" and the other says, "Jesus was divine"? Or when Christians say that Jesus' death is central to their understanding of the faith and Muslims say that Jesus did not die?**

Differences should be occasions for, not obstacles to, dialogue. Different interpretations of the same events and figures can be found within all religions.

Once after I gave a talk on the subject of Jesus in Islam a gentleman in the audience asked what Muslims' response would be to Jesus saying that he is the Son of God. Theologically speaking, according to Islam, Jesus always speaks the truth. The problem is not about what Jesus said, but about our understanding of what Jesus said. Do we understand Jesus correctly?

Muslim theologians will first look for verification of the statement and then at the words Jesus used in their original form or language. The common ground with Christians is the belief that Jesus always speaks the truth. Even if we cannot solve all of our theological differences in this way, we can get to know each other better and find ways we can cooperate and areas where we do agree. In the end, we find that we are not as different as we thought we were.

## **What was the Prophet Muhammad's relationship to Christianity before his visit from the angel?**

The Prophet Muhammad, peace and blessing be upon him, was born in Mecca, in what is today Saudi Arabia. Although Mecca was a trading center, we do not know if there was an established Christian community there at the time. Most people were polytheists, with the exception of a few who had converted to Christianity, such as the Prophet's wife's cousin, Waraqa ibn Nawfal, with whom the Prophet shared his first experience of revelation, when the angel Gabriel appeared to him with the command "Read."

Unlike many of the people of Mecca, the Prophet never worshiped idols, and it is believed that he followed the remnants of the religion of Abraham before he received the revelation. Some sources say that when he traveled to Syria as a child, he met a monk named Bahira. According to these sources, Bahira was an Arab Arian or perhaps Gnostic who saw that a cloud was following the Meccan caravan to provide protection from the heat. Bahira wanted to offer the travelers a meal. Most of the people in the caravan went to the meal, but they asked Muhammad to stay with the caravan. Bahira realized that the cloud stayed with the caravan. He asked if anyone had stayed behind, and the people said that a boy had been left. He asked them to bring the boy, and he realized that the cloud was following Muhammad. He foresaw that the boy would be a great man; he told the Prophet's uncle, Abu Talib, to protect this boy.

## **Has your experience in interfaith dialogue changed you?**

Before coming to the United States, I was teaching in an area of Turkey known as the birthplace of Abraham. In my college years, I majored in Islamic theology and law. My attention was drawn to the Qur'anic concept of *Ahl al-Kitab* or the People of the Book. My understanding of this concept was mostly theoretical. I understood the Qur'anic approach to be that God preferred the People of the Book over people who do not believe in God. In school, we often talked about how Muslims should side with America instead of the USSR, because Americans are People of the Book. But I never had a deep relationship with anyone who was either Jewish or Christian.

In the United States I began to work with Jews and Christians who shared many of the same qualities of goodness that I understood from Islam. In fact, in Islam people are good people not because of one's nominal faith, but because of the quality of

the person. There is a saying of the Prophet: God does not look at your appearance, but instead looks at your heart. So if you have a Christian who is kind and honest and a Muslim who is not, you can say, even from an Islamic perspective, that the Christian is qualitatively a better Muslim than the Muslim. For me, the idea of the People of the Book is critical because I think that we all share many good qualities that can bring us closer together as individuals and as a community.

### **What extra-Qur'anic sources are most influential for you in your faith?**

The Qur'an is the primary source of Islam. Then there are the sayings of the Prophet, known as the Hadith. Scholars of Islam, with various skills and purposes, have interpreted these sources, and Islamic law, theology, spirituality, and so on have developed as a result. Islamic scholars have reached the apex of their knowledge while studying and commenting on these sources.

If I had to choose which of these scholars have been most influential to me, I would have to choose al-Ghazali from the classical era and Said Nursî from the modern era. I find both of them remarkably open-minded, inspiring, tolerant, occasionally critical of divergent views, but at the same time compassionate.

*A version of this article appears in the June 7 print edition under the title "Who is Jesus for Muslims?" It was edited on May 30 to correct the identification of Waraqa ibn Nawfal, who was the cousin of the Prophet's wife Khadija, not her nephew.*