

AL-MASIHU-ISA/ JESUS: The Messiah Apostle, Prophet, or More?

I. Introduction

It might seem odd to some that on a June evening, so many would gather to consider the titles and identity of a religious figure from 2000 years ago. Perhaps some would come because of historical interest or some other abstract academic consideration. Others might come out of a religious interest, a mild curiosity for exotic or esoteric knowledge. But others, though, would see more than some slightly relevant topic of research. They would realize that this title for Jesus, “Messiah” or “Christ” in English, goes to the heart of the truth claims for two major world religions.

Muslims and Christians especially know this is an important topic because it highlights the issue of the true identity of Jesus, and with his identity His true message. Historically, many people have claimed to be the Messiah but both Muslims and Christians hold Jesus to be the one true Messiah. To Muslims the title is one of great respect given to Jesus in the Qur’an which supports the Qur’an’s view of Jesus’ role as a prophet. To Christians, the title is one of supreme importance, revealing an exalted personal identity and a universal eternal mission.

Tonight I will compare the respective views of Jesus as the Messiah in Islam and Christianity. I will compare and contrast them and bring out the significant issues of the views for these two religions.

Also, in presenting and comparing them I will bring out the personal challenges that this title, “Messiah” brings out for Christians, Muslims, and others.

I am a Christian, and this meeting is sponsored by Christians, so there is Christian literature available for free on the table. Also, I want to say at the outset that the organizers of this meeting and I do want to persuade people to believe in the Jesus of the Bible. It would be deceitful to deny it. But, with that desire, we also realize that before God, we must not in any way misrepresent the views of another religion or person, or try in any way to force belief. Before God we must treat the convictions of other people with respect and sympathy and treat evidence evenhandedly. We should all agree that truth cannot be supported, defended, or promoted with falsehood. That is both logically and ethically wrong. To that end, I invite any criticisms and corrections to what I am about to present.

My plan for this evening is to first, present an outline of the Islamic view of Jesus as the Messiah. Then I would like to present the Christian view. I will then draw out some key similarities and differences. To finish, I will present some challenges this material raises for all of us.

II. Islam's View

In stating Islam's view, it must be recognized that Muslims and Christians both agree on the identity of the Messiah, that it is a title uniquely given to Jesus. Though originally a Jewish concept, only Muslims and Christians view Jesus as the true and only Messiah.

A. The Messiah in the Qur'an

The Qur'an teaches that the title "Messiah" or "Al-Masih" in Arabic is one of the unique titles given to Jesus to honour him. This title is used of Jesus 11 times in the Qur'an {3:45; 4:157,171,172; 5:17(2x), 72(2x), 75; 9:30;31}. Among Islamic scholars there is disagreement as to exactly what the name means and where it comes from. Some say it comes originally from Hebrew, some trace it to Syriac or Ethiopic roots, and some to strictly Arabic roots. The main meanings Muslims scholars have given the word are

- (a) "filled with blessing" (Tabari on 3:45),
- (b) "Blessed One" (Baidawi in Hughes Dict. of Islam "Al-Masih),
- (c) "anointed" from his touching people to heal them or being anointed by Gabriel to prophethood (Baidawi in Hughes Dict. of Islam "Al-Masih"),
- (d) "purified" having to do with being purified from sin (Tabari on 3:45), or
- (e) having to do with his feet or walking because of his itinerant ministry (Sufi view from Robinson, 1991).

The Qur'an itself never gives a definition for the word. It assumes the original hearers of the references to the messiah knew what it meant and needed no explanation. The Qur'an, though, does make some very definite statements as to what the title Messiah does not signify and presents these statements as corrections to misunderstandings people had concerning the Messiah. The two key references for these are Surah 4:157 and 4:171 (All of the other references restate the views contained in these two verses):

"And because of their saying: We slew the Messiah Jesus son of Mary, Allah's messenger -- They slew him not nor crucified, but it appeared so unto them; and lo! those who disagree concerning it are in doubt thereof; they have no knowledge thereof save pursuit of a conjecture; they slew him not for certain."
(Surah 4:157, Pickthall's translation)

"O People of the Scripture! Do not exaggerate in your religion nor utter aught concerning Allah save the truth. The Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, was only a messenger of Allah, and His word which He conveyed unto Mary, and a spirit from Him. So believe in Allah and His messengers, and say not "Three"-- Cease! (it is) better for you!--Allah is only One God. Far is it removed from His

transcendent majesty that he should have a son.... The Messiah will never scorn to be a slave unto Allah, nor will the favored angels..." (Surah 4:171, 172, Pickthall's translation)

From these references, three important points are made as to the Islamic view of the Messiah:

1. He was not crucified.
2. He was only a messenger of Allah, an Islamic technical term for apostle or sent one, used often of prophets.
3. He was just a human, a slave of Allah, and in no way was he divine in his own nature or a member of a trinity.

These corrections to the views of Christians are presented to reinforce the Islamic view of Jesus being just a prophet. The Qur'an records Jesus as performing many miracles, even raising people from the dead, but these are always presented as being miracles Jesus was permitted to do by the power of Allah and not any power of his own. Also, he is described as an apostle sent with a book of Scripture called the Gospel. The Qur'an emphasizes these roles of prophet and apostle for Jesus rather than the title Messiah. Messiah is used as a title of respect but not one that gives Jesus an identity above that of a prophet. Jesus is presented as a prophet who does more miracles than any other, and he is given a special role in bringing this age in the world to a close. But He is still just a prophet. This role of the Messiah is explained in the traditions of Islam called the hadith.

B. The Messiah in the Hadith

One other verse in the Qur'an is presented as a glimpse of a future role for the Messiah:

"And he shall be a known sign for the Hour. Therefore have no doubt concerning it. And follow Me! This is the straight Path." (Surah 43:61, Maktaba Dar-us-Salaam translation)

This verse has come to be interpreted as predicting the return of Christ to the world to finish his work.. Traditions and Muslim commentators add that at his return, Jesus will kill the Antichrist (Dadjjaal), judge all Christians and Jews as well as the rest of mankind by the Qur'an, break all the crosses, kill all pigs, and bring in a time of unprecedented prosperity and peace, having subdued the world for Islam (Baidawi as mentioned in the SEI, p. 175).

Some of the later traditions also picture Jesus during his first time of ministry as a wandering, barefoot, ascetic preacher. They glorify his poverty, wisdom, his piety and his miracles of kindness.

In short, the Qur'an pictures Jesus as primarily a prophet. His title of Messiah does not elevate him above that role or denote any special qualities of his personal nature. He is just a man who was chosen to be a prophet. The title Messiah is used as one of great respect to honor a special prophet and apostle of Islam.

III. The Bible's View

Turning to Christianity's view of the Messiah, Christians agree with Muslims in that they identify Jesus as the only true Messiah. However, they view his ministry and identity quite differently from Muslims.

The word "Messiah" in the Bible has only one meaning, "an anointed one" and refers at its most basic to the kings of Israel, in that they were anointed before God to rule. The Old Testament, though, also predicts the coming of a divine person who would be God's ultimate king on the earth. This ultimate King came to be referred to as *The* Messiah and He became the hope of the Jewish people in the time before Jesus. The predictions for this Person present three main facets of the Messiah's ministry. First, He would be a King ruling for God over Israel as well as be the ultimate king ruling over all the nations of the earth. Second, He would be the ultimate prophet sent to mankind whose teaching would have the greatest authority. Third, this Messiah would be a Servant who would personally suffer the wrath of God as a guilt offering for sin.

The Jews had a hard time figuring out how these three strands of teaching in their scriptures could refer to the same Messiah and so by the time of Jesus there had arisen many different views of the what the Messiah would be like. Most Jews at that time focused on only one of these facets, that of a glorious King from heaven who would defeat Israel's foes and establish Israel as the chief of the nations. Jesus was very careful to not present Himself as the answer to just those nationalistic hopes. This is probably why Jesus seldom used the title Messiah for himself and used the more enigmatic title, "Son of Man".

Rather than limit himself to just one facet of Messiah's ministry, Jesus presented Himself as being the fulfillment of all three of the major facets, the first as King in that He claimed to be the rightful descendent of David with the right to rule over Israel and the right to rule the earth at the end of the age, the second in that He claimed to be the ultimate prophet sent to mankind, and the third as Servant in that He suffered on the cross for mankind's sin and rose from the dead. Let's take these in turn to look at the Bible's view of the role of the Messiah.

A. Role of the Messiah

1. The king of Israel and ultimate king

Jesus willingly and repeatedly accepted the title "Son of David" in its meaning as the rightful ruler over Israel when people used it of him. (Matthew 9:27--two blind men; Matthew 15:22--a Gentile woman from Tyre and Sidon; Mark 10:47--

Blind Bartimaeus; Matt. 21:9--the Triumphal Entry; Matt. 21:15--the children in the Temple;).

Also, Jesus referred to Himself as the ultimate King to rule over the earth in using the title "Son of Man." This is a direct reference to Daniel 7:13,14, a prophecy made 500+ years before Christ's birth, where such an ultimate king is predicted and named as the Son of Man.

"In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into His presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshipped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed." (Daniel 7:13,14)

Jesus also referred to Himself as this Son of Man when He predicted His return to earth in glory in Matthew 24:5-31. In this passage Jesus explicitly refers to Himself as both the Christ (Greek for Messiah) and the Son of Man. Jesus said:

"For false Christs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and miracles to deceive even the elect-- if that were possible. See, I have told you ahead of time....For as lightning that comes from the east is visible even in the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man.... They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky, with power and great glory. And he will send his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of the heavens to the other." (Matthew 24: 24,25,27,30,31.)

2. The ultimate prophet

Another important Old Testament title Jesus took to Himself was that of the prophet that Moses predicted in Deuteronomy 18:18,19:

"I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers; I will put my words in his mouth, and he will tell them everything I command him.If anyone does not listen to my words that the prophet speaks in my name, I myself will call him to account."

On one occasion, Jesus said to the Jewish religious leaders who were not believing in Him:

"But do not think I will accuse you before the Father. Your accuser is Moses, on whom your hopes are set. If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me." (John 5:45,46)

3. The servant

Another title from the Old Testament that Jesus took to Himself was the “Servant.” Jesus said: **“For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.”** (Mark 10:45) Here, Jesus was claiming the title “Son of Man” for Himself and tying it with the predicted “Servant” of the prophecies from the book of Isaiah, written 700 years before.

"Yet it was the Lord's will to crush him and cause him to suffer, and though the Lord makes his life a guilt offering.... After the suffering of his soul, he will see the light and be satisfied; by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many, and he will bear their iniquities. Therefore I will give him a portion among the great, and he will divide the spoils with the strong, because he poured out his life unto death, and was numbered with the transgressors. For he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors." (Isaiah 53:10-12)

Jesus presented Himself as this Messiah of the Old Testament--the King of Israel and ultimate King of the earth, the Ultimate prophet, and the Servant suffering for mankind's sin. The combination of these three facets shows that the Bible's view of the Messiah makes Him much more than a prophet. He has a unique exalted identity that is greater than the greatest prophets mentioned in the Bible.

B. Personal nature of the Messiah

Some of the titles given to the Messiah speak to His personal Nature as well as His role. These titles and the prophecies about Him assert things about his personal nature that require Him to be more than an ordinary human being. We need to look at two of these briefly: Son of Man and the Son of God.

1. Son of Man

We considered the title “Son of Man” earlier in its bearing on the Messiah being a universal King. That prophecy in Daniel also presents the Son of Man as a divine figure coming to earth from heaven. There are other Old Testament verses that describe the Messiah as being a divine figure and even having the attributes of God. Isaiah 9:6 is one of the most significant and it was written more than 700 years before the birth of Christ:

"For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And He will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace."

2. Son of God

This title is first a Messianic title in that kings of Israel were called sons of God. The Messiah as the ultimate king would then be known also as “God’s Son.”

Also, “Son of God” as used of and by Jesus speaks of the personal nature of the Messiah and His unique relationship with God the Father. In Jesus’ teaching recorded in the Gospels, Jesus taught He is of the same essential spiritual nature as the Father. They have the same kind of character, powers and abilities. They are one in essence, nature, or substance. Concerning their relationship, Jesus taught there is an eternal, spiritual relationship between God the Father and God the Son. In other words, Jesus has always been the Son. In this eternal relationship Jesus has the relationship of love, rights, and submission as a son to a Father. Jesus has taken on the role of a son. He voluntarily acts as a son and receives all the privileges and responsibilities that that relationship brings.

“Son of God” as it refers to Jesus the Messiah does not mean having a physical origin or any kind of idea that the eternal Son started to exist at a point in time. It has no idea of God having a sexual relationship with Mary. Rather, the title means the Messianic King who exists in an eternal, spiritual relationship with God the Father, sharing the essential attributes of God.

All three of these titles, Son of God, Son of Man, and Messiah are related in the Bible. They refer to the same person. They speak to different facets of His identity, ministry, and character, but they also all refer to a person who is God in human flesh.

C. The return of the Messiah

Like Islam, the Bible and Christianity also believe in the return of Christ at the end of the age when He will return in power and glory. But at this return, He will subdue and judge mankind according to the biblical standards of behavior and according to people’s beliefs in Him as the Messiah and Savior. He will then usher in a time of unprecedented peace and prosperity under His rule.

Overall, in the Bible’s presentation of the Messiah, it presents Him as:

- the ideal King of God,
- the ideal Prophet of God,
- the ultimate Servant of mankind, the guilt offering for mankind’s sins, and
- a divine and human person from heaven destined to be the King over all the earth for eternity.

IV. Similarities and Differences

A. Agree on the Identity of the Messiah

Islam and Christianity agree that Jesus is the only Messiah. They do not present anyone else as having this title. They both believe that it is one of the most important titles he possesses, and that it is one of special honor and respect.

B. Disagree on the Role and Personal Nature of the Messiah

Where Islam and Christianity disagree are on the role of the Messiah and His personal nature. Though within Islam there is uncertainty as to the exact meaning of the word, "Messiah," Islam sees the title as being mainly one of respect and honour, not one tied to a specific role outside of or greater than his role as an Islamic-style prophet. The title merely describes that as a prophet, Jesus is given a special honour in being granted an additional title of honor and respect.

Also, Islam views Jesus as only a man. Though he performed many miracles and even had a miraculous birth, in the Qur'an Jesus claims to be just a man. The Qur'an clearly states that Jesus is in no way divine.

The Bible, however, presents his role as a prophet as being subordinate to His role as the Messiah. His prophethood is part of a larger role of ultimate King and Servant of mankind. The Bible places more emphasis on these two aspects, Kingship and Servanthood than on Jesus' prophethood. As Servant He is the Savior of the world. As King He is the rightful Judge and ruler of the earth. And the Bible also presents that the Messiah is somehow divine as well as human. It presents Him as having the character and attributes of God Himself, as well as being a man. He is the eternal Son of God, the heavenly Son of Man as well as the Messiah for mankind.

C. Agree on Some Facets of Messiah's Return

Islam and Christianity agree on some aspects of the return of the Messiah at the end of the age. He will return in power and subdue the earth. He will usher in an unprecedented time of peace and prosperity. Both religions even locate many of the events of His return in and around Jerusalem.

D. Disagree on the Purpose of that Return

But Islam and Christianity disagree significantly on the purpose of the Messiah's return. Islam presents it as to subdue the world for Islam. Christianity presents it that He will subdue the world for Himself. Islam presents Him as a prophet returning to establish the religion of Islam worldwide. The Bible presents Jesus as returning to establish His own Kingdom and rule over the earth.

V. Challenges to Us

The biggest challenge to us in the 21st Century is to decide for ourselves which view is right. Both Islam and Christianity present that our view of the Messiah will determine

our eternity. The Qur'an teaches that if you view Jesus as God in any way you are bound for hell. The Bible teaches that if a person does not trust in the atoning death of the Messiah for their sins, they will perish in hell. These views cannot be combined into some kind of satisfying synthesis. They are making absolute truth claims.

Muslims, in evaluating these things, need to realize that their view significantly disagrees with the prior Scriptures. The Qur'an claims to correct the Bible's view, yet it does not come with historical evidence to back up its claim. Also, no reason is given for why its view of the Messiah differs so much from the view of the Bible. The Bible's view of the Messiah is the one that was current at the time of Jesus, and it was the basic view of both groups in the intervening centuries until the time of Muhammad. Jews or Christians did not change their views of the Messiah so that it needed correction. The Islamic view of the Messiah does not come with any evidence for why it should overthrow the established view of the Messiah, one that had been established for 600 years before Muhammad was born. Because this is the situation, Muslims need to seriously consider the Bible's view of the Messiah.

Christians, in evaluating these things, need to evaluate the Muslim view for themselves. Does it come with adequate authority to correct the Bible? Does it have adequate historical evidence to back up its claims? Using all available means of evaluation, is the Qur'an's view of the Messiah more true than the Bible's. Christians should evaluate the claims of Islam for themselves and not just take my word for it.

Any other people here tonight who are not committed to either Islam or Christianity need to realize that this is not just an academic question. The Bible's Messiah is claiming to be the only one who can provide eternal salvation; forgiveness before a holy God who has the right to judge you. The Qur'an's Messiah is saying that you must embrace Islam in order to have a hope of being saved. These are the claims you should not ignore because death is real and these faiths present that it is in this life that the choices that count for the next are made. If you value your soul you need to look into these things.

VI. Conclusion

It is my prayer that tonight your understanding of the different views for the Messiah has increased. I hope also that your sympathy and respect for people of other faiths has been increased. Also, I hope you have been challenged to objectively evaluate your own beliefs. The search for the truth is the most important quest to which we can devote our lives. I hope you have found tonight useful in your quest. Thank you.

Given by Keith E. Small at Durham University, Dept. of Middle Eastern and Arabic Studies, 21 June 2000.