

Who is the real Jesus, The Qur'an's or the Bible's?

I. Introduction

Thank you for the privilege of speaking to you tonight. We live in a great day of opportunity. Never before have people been able to seek out the truth on the issues that really matter as we can today. With privilege comes responsibility. The issues that Islam and Christianity raise about Jesus deserve the most careful, fair, and objective study that we can apply. None of us has the luxury of blindly following what we want to believe is true. No one likes to have their holy books or beliefs criticized. But, we must examine our books and these issues critically, and seriously listen to the questions and criticisms others raise about them. We must, because first of all, our books tell us our eternal destinies are at stake. And second, Truth is too important and too precious to use as a pawn in partisan religious arguments.

The standards of criticism I use will be as fairly applied to both books as I can. I am a committed Christian and I believe with all my heart the truth of the Christian faith and the teaching of the Bible. But I also recognize that if anyone's faith is to be based on truth it must be able to stand up to hard questions and criticism.

Basic to all of our thinking tonight, both mine and I think Mr. Saeed's, is that revelation from God should *at the very least* be historically accurate. We believe that God does not leave Himself and His acts in time without adequate witness or testimony. And that is what we are here to examine tonight--the historical evidence God has left concerning Jesus Christ.

I will approach the topic under three headings. First I will present how we can be confident that the Bible presents the most accurate account of Jesus Christ's teaching and actions that is available to us. Second, I will then go on to summarize what the Bible says about Jesus. Third, I will explain why I find Islam's view (and many others) to be less reliable and inadequate. I will then conclude with some remarks as to why the teaching of Jesus is of the utmost relevance to us today.

II. Historical Reliability

By historical reliability I mean, does the book present what really happened, Is it the record of earliest Christians concerning the Jesus they knew and loved?

There are two main ways of testing historical reliability with ancient documents: first is the manuscript evidence itself- are there physical documents early enough to realistically document these things? Related to this is the additional factor of are the documents

referred to in other literature contemporary to the literature being examined. These kinds of literary evidence are called external evidence. The second way is called internal evidence: Do the contents of the documents fit the time, place and events in which they have their setting?

First of all, the manuscripts for the New Testament's presentation of Jesus are early. Actual copies of the New Testament documents exist within 100-150 years of the events, and writings of second generation Christians have survived that fill that gap by quoting and paraphrasing most of the New Testament writings, so that we can know with certainty that the major New Testament writings were written well within the first century during the lifetimes of the Apostles of Jesus.

Also, when you look at the cultural setting that these writings present, it is clearly a 1st century setting. The people, places, and events mentioned all fit with 1st century Palestine as we know of it from other literature and archaeology, rather than 2nd century Palestine or later. From other finds such as the Dead Sea Scrolls, and other surviving Jewish, Roman, and Greek literature, the Gospels and Epistles of the New Testament make sense in the first century- with the political issues of that day, with the theological thinking of that day, and with the social and cultural customs of that day. Because of this, and the manuscript evidence that also confirms this, we can take the New Testament presents to us the testimony of the earliest Christians concerning Jesus. In the last century, many skeptical scholars tried to defend views that the Gospels were written well after the lives of the 1st generation of Christians. Because of the discoveries of early manuscripts, the testimony of the second generation of Christians, and the way the Gospels fit the 1st century setting such views can no longer be realistically defended.

The earliest Christians believed that Jesus was the true Messiah of Israel. They believed He performed the miracles recorded in the gospels. They also believe that He rose physically from the dead after being crucified at the hands of the Romans. And most controversially, they believed that these things demonstrated that He was the universal Lord and Savior of mankind, and that He somehow was Israel's God, Yahweh, who had personally entered history and made atonement for mankind's sins.

Perhaps the most important way this can be seen is in how Jesus presented Himself as Israel's Messiah. The Jews of the 1st century were expecting a person with the title of Messiah. With this, they had developed different views of what kind of a person this Messiah would be.

III. The Bible's Jesus: the Messiah

The word "Messiah" in the Bible has the basic meaning, "an anointed one" and refers at its most basic level to the kings of Israel, in that they were anointed with oil as a symbol of God's Spirit for them to rule on God's behalf. The Old Testament, though, also predicted 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.

As scholars have examined both the Old Testament predictions of the Messiah and Jewish literature from before and around the time of Jesus concerning this figure, some have grouped the facets of the Messiah's ministry under three major headings. First, Messiah would be a King ruling for God over Israel as well as being 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/High Priest who would mediate between God and mankind by personally suffering the wrath of God as a guilt offering for mankind's sin. Also, together with the enormity of these tasks, there was a sense from the predictions that somehow this Messiah would be a powerful figure from heaven itself worthy of worship.

The Jews had a hard time figuring out how these three major 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. Jesus, though, presented Himself as the embodiment of all three facets.

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)

When Jesus entered Jerusalem on the back of a donkey's colt, he was openly presenting Himself as the Messiah, the rightful King of Israel, fulfilling an important prophecy from Zechariah 9:9 (Matthew 21:1-11/Luke 19:29-40).

There are more I could list, but these are some of the key ways that Jesus openly claimed to be the Messiah of the Jews.

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." (Deuteronomy 18:18,19)

On one occasion, Jesus said to the Jewish religious leaders who were not then 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)

Jesus also acted as the ultimate prophet in that He claimed to come with teaching in his own name that was greater than that given to Moses and any previous prophets (Transfiguration Matthew 17, "Truly, Truly, I say unto you" statements, Matthew 19 on divorce).

3. Servant/High Priest

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)

Also, when Jesus cleansed the temple (John), he was implicitly declaring his authority over the whole Temple system and His personal right to judge it. To a Jewish mind, only God or the rightful king had the right to do this. After this, when He instituted the Lord's supper with His disciples (Matt. 26:26), by saying

that He was inaugurating a new covenant in his blood, He was declaring to the disciples what the crucifixion would accomplish, and implicitly stating that the Temple system was no longer necessary for the forgiveness of sins. Rather than the Temple being the place to meet with God for the forgiveness of sin and to come near to His presence, He, Jesus was now that place to meet God and receive forgiveness.

Also, because in His miracles He demonstrated His personal authority over the forces of nature, His power to heal the sick and raise the dead, and His personal authority to forgive sin, He was implicitly declaring to the Jews that He had the right and power to do the things that only their God, Yahweh, had the right and power to do. By these means He was identifying Himself as the God of the Jews who had come to them in human flesh. The Jews got the point stating at one time as to why they were trying to stone Him: “For a good work we do not stone you, but for blasphemy; because you, being a man, make yourself out to be God.” (John 10:31-33). The Jewish Scriptures pointed to such a thing being possible, but the Jews of Jesus’ time did not want to believe it.

Jesus presented Himself as this Messiah from heaven 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, an identity worthy of worship. This depiction is carried through the rest of the New Testament that Jesus Christ is to be the ultimate ruler of mankind and its judge after death.

B. The Son of God

Special note needs to be made of the title for Jesus, “Son of God”. This title was 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 His personal and 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. 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 as Jesus used it 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.

IV. Why Islam's view is inadequate

There are two main reasons why I find Islam's view of Jesus to be inadequate and wrong.

1. Though the Qur'an claims at least 9 times to confirm the teaching of the prior Scriptures, meaning the Scriptures of the Jews and Christians (S. 2:91; 3:3, 81; 4:47; 5:48; 6:93; 10:38; 12:111; 35:31), it actually presents a Jesus with more affinities to views of Jesus present in 7th century Arabia and the theological disputes current then, than it presents a Jesus that is actually of the setting of the 1st century.

[This also happens to be the problem with many other views of Jesus. The Gnostic gospels and books fit settings more from the 3rd century to the 8th. The Gospel of Barnabas fits a 14th century setting more than the 1st century. The Book of Mormon fits more with thinking and stories going around in the mid 1800's than the first century.]

Back to the Qur'an, it records that two of Jesus' most notable miracles were speaking from a cradle (S. 19:30) and giving life to birds of clay he had made (S. 3:49). Neither of these miracles is in the earliest records of Jesus' ministry- the Gospels in the New Testament. They are however found in some later popular Christian literature from the 400's, particularly in a book that has come to be called the Arabic Gospel of the Infancy. The author of this book took some of his material from other books, like the Biblical Gospels and other Christian popular literature (like one book called the Protevangelium of James). When you examine the themes of the book, they reflect the theological disputes of the 400's, especially concerning the exaltation of Mary, Jesus' mother, well above normal womanhood. Now, whoever wrote the Arabic Gospel of the Infancy was careful in that when he was using a Gospel story from the Bible, he quoted it exactly or almost exactly. (He also quoted carefully from the Diatessaron, a harmony of the Biblical Gospels that was popular in Syria at that time.) But when he borrowed from other early Christian literature, he was much more free to paraphrase and invent, showing that he understood a distinction between Canonical Scripture and Christian literature. The Qur'an incorporates elements of these stories without a consciousness of that distinction. It incorporates facets of stories that had their beginnings in earlier popular Christian literature and treats them as Christian Scripture.

This point can be carried on with other facets of the Qur'an's portrayal of Jesus and Christianity as well - that it was using Christian material current in the 7th century without really having an understanding of the Jesus of the first century.

Another crucial example is statements in Surah 5:72-75,116 that Allah is not one of three and that Jesus should not be taken as a god alongside Allah and Mary. A

statement like that would have made no sense in the 1st century. The followers of Jesus at that time were not saying Jesus was one of three- as they did later when they formalized the doctrine of the Trinity, nor did they associate Mary with God. She was rather one of the followers of Jesus that traveled with him and the disciples. But, such a view of the exaltation of Mary makes sense in 7th century Arabia, because there had been groups in Arabia that did excessively venerate Mary in the centuries immediately preceding Islam. And there were major Christian groups in 7th century Arabia that were continuing the debate about the Trinity.

Like the AGI gives us a Polaroid of 5th century theological disputes, the Qur'an gives us a Polaroid of 7th century disputes going on in Arabia. If the statements about Jesus and attributed to Jesus in the Qur'an were truly from Him and preserved intact, we would expect them to evince their first century origins by stating things that were congruent with the 1st century setting. Instead, they come across as 7th century words being put in Jesus' mouth. This would be comparable to putting words from a speech from Tony Blair into the mouth of King Henry the 8th in the 1400's.

It is because of this kind of thing that the Qur'an cannot be taken as a more reliable or authoritative source than the gospels in the Bible about the life and teachings of Jesus.

2. The second reason why the Qur'an's view of Jesus is inadequate is that the Qur'an's and Islam's view of Jesus starts with a different view of God's nature than the Bible, one more in line with the Aristotelian view of a distant god than with the one of the Bible who freely enters human affairs and experience to communicate not only His will but Himself.

I find that in talking with Muslims, they often do not realize how different the Bible's view of God is from the Qur'an's view of God. I find they often expect the Bible's to be the same as the Qur'an's and they inadvertently or even purposely try to read the Qur'an's view onto the Bible. One way this can be seen is in the question that I often receive: "Do you believe Jesus is God?" If by that the Muslim means, "Do I think He is Allah as presented in the Qur'an? No. I do not think Jesus is that kind of god. Do I think He is Yahweh as presented in the whole of the Bible, then the answer is a definite Yes." The Bible's God is different from the distant and remote god of ancient Greek philosophy, of the Gnostic religions of the 2-8th centuries, of Islam, and the more modern views of Deism. He is a much more personal God- one who, while He is the unique Creator and Judge and is exalted over the universe, is also able and willing to enter time and space to reveal Himself and His will to people.

It was this God that the Bible records walked with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. It was this God who personally revealed Himself to Abraham, to Hagar, Ishmael's mother, and to Jacob in the person of Angel of the Lord. It was this

God who accompanied the Israelites and Moses in the pillar of smoke and fire out of Egypt. It was this God who appeared to Moses and the 70 Elders of Israel and then dwelt personally in the Tabernacle and then the Temple through His Shekinah glory resting over the mercy seat in the most holy place. It was this God who came upon Israel's Kings and her prophets through His Spirit and indwelt them. And it is this God who came in human flesh as Jesus Christ.

[Also, in the Old Testament and in ancient Jewish thinking, to personify different attributes of God and to treat them as distinguishable personal entities was allowable. It did not violate their sense of monotheism. And not just as a figure of speech but signifying some real personal distinction existing within God. God's Word, Wisdom, and Spirit are treated this way by a number of prophets in the Old Testament (Prov. 8:22-31, Wisdom; Isaiah 9:6, Micah 5:2, Messiah is called God; Jeremiah 23:5,6, Branch is called Lord; Isaiah 48:12-16, 63:8-16, Holy Spirit and a third person). The New Testament also picks up on many of these facets and presents Jesus as the Word of God incarnate (John 1:1), God's wisdom incarnate (Luke 9:58), and refers to the Holy Spirit of God as another person. (The New Testament never refers to Jesus as God's Spirit.)]

[Even the word for the oneness of God in the Bible allows for there to be more than one person within the one God. The word for one in the shema: "Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord is One!" (Deut. 6:4) is *echad*, which allows for internal divisions. It is the word used when it is said of man and wife that they become one flesh. It is the only word used for God's oneness in the Old Testament, and yet there was a perfectly good Hebrew word for solitary, mathematical oneness: *yachid*, used in Gen. 22:2 when God said to Abraham, "Take now your son, your **only** son, whom you love, Isaac..." to take him to the place of sacrifice.]

Another way is that I find Muslims who try to find an Islamic view of God from the Bible inevitably take only a partial sampling of its verses. They pick and choose statements that seem to support their view while missing out on ones that do not.

And this view of God is not because anyone has changed the Bible and corrupted it away from some original that was more congenial to Islam's view. The Old and the New Testaments of the Bible have not been changed that way, even though many people think they have. The Christians took the Hebrew Scriptures as they found them and still regarded them as Scripture. To these they added the books they believed contained the God-inspired authoritative teachings concerning Jesus. There is abundant manuscript evidence and historical evidence that demonstrates this if one cares to look into it with an open mind.

V. Conclusion

I find that rather than face the historical Jesus, with His incredible claims to universal authority and being the only Saviour, many people have sought to create a Jesus they like more, by reinterpreting the Bible, by adding to it, by contradicting it, or even by ignoring it. Your choice tonight is to consider the Jesus of History and His claims on your life or to choose a Jesus more to your own liking that comes with inferior credibility and authority.

Consider these statements from Jesus:

"Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart; and YOU SHALL FIND REST FOR YOUR SOULS. For My yoke is easy and My load is light." (Matthew 11:28-30 - quote from Jeremiah. 6:16)

"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)

"For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life." (John 3:16 NIV)

"I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but through Me." (John 14:6)

"Do not be afraid; I am the first and the last, and the living One; and I was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of death and of Hades." (Revelation 1:17,18)

I invite you to trust in the risen and victorious Christ for forgiveness of sin and heaven.

Thank you for your attention.

Given by Keith E. Small at Edinburgh University, George Square Lecture Theatre, 5 February 2004. Copyright