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Preface

What is offered here is a fairly comprehensive selection of the narrations pertaining to Jesus (ʻa) said to have been reported by the Shiʻi Imams, peace be with them. It is generally admitted that not everything reported in this literature is correct, and the science of hadith has been developed by Muslim scholars precisely for the purpose of sorting through the narrations and evaluating their strength. No attempt has been made in what follows to select only ahadith considered reliable.

The narrations selected provide an overview of what various reporters of ahadith have claimed that the Imams have said about Jesus (ʻa). At the same time, we cannot claim that our selection exhausts all such narrations. Sometimes we have found several reports that differ only in some insignificant details, in which case we have generally selected the most complete form of the report.

Also omitted are reports in which Jesus is mentioned only incidentally, although where such incidental mention seemed interesting to us, we have provided the excerpt from the hadith. The *isnad*, or chains of transmission that accompany the reports, have been omitted from the English translations since they would only be of use to those who have fluency in Arabic.

It is rather disheartening to find that so much misunderstanding remains between Christians and Muslims in the world today. Hopefully the collection presented here will be seen by Christians as a gift from the Shiʻah to show the reverence they have for Jesus (ʻa). The vision of Jesus (ʻa) to be found here is different from that of Christianity, and the difference is bound to lead some to respond negatively, “No. The Christ we know is not like that.”

We are not concerned to argue here for the veracity of the vision of Christ presented. Of course Christians will deny what conflicts with their beliefs. However, it is hoped that the reader will be able to bracket the question of what reports about Jesus (ʻa) are best considered factual, because this question depends on the standards used for such evaluations, whether doctrinal, historical or otherwise.

According to our faith, as Shiʻah, the overall picture of Christ presented below is true, although questions may be raised about particular narrations or details thereof. This is how we think of Christ. It is a different way of thinking about him from what is familiar to Christians. However, it is by no means disrespectful,

and it offers a way to understand the more general religious vision of Islam, particularly Shi'ia Islam.

It is up to our readers to choose to respond by focusing on differences and rejecting what is contrary to their beliefs, or to find how much we have in common and on this basis to search for what is of value in the Muslim's view, even where it differs from what one is prepared to accept.

We expect that our readers will include English speaking Muslims, both Sunni and Shi'ia, as well as Christians. To them we offer this collection as an opportunity to reacquaint themselves with Islamic teachings about Jesus, and hope that it will inspire better relations between Muslims and Christians. Even as we stand fast in our own faith, we should be prepared to deepen our appreciation of the commitment of Christians to follow the teachings of one held in such high esteem in the Qur'an and ahadith.

In the glorious Qur'an, in a passage describing the annunciation to the Blessed Virgin Mary, Jesus ('a) is described as a Word from God:

***O Mary! Verily Allah gives you the glad tidings of a Word from Him; his name is the Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, prominent in this world and in the Hereafter of those near* [*to God*]. (*3:44*)**

The context in which this *ayah* was revealed was one of interreligious encounter. It is said that the Christians of Najran sent a delegation to the Prophet of Islam (S) at Mecca to question him about the teachings of Islam concerning Jesus ('a), and that God revealed the above and other *ayat* of *Surah Al–i 'Imran* in response. The response is not merely a denial of Christian teachings, although the divinity of Christ is clearly rejected, but an affirmation of much believed by Christians, as well, even the designation of Christ as *logos:*

***O People of the Book! Do not transgress in your religion, and do not say of Allah but the Truth. Verily, the Messiah, Jesus the son of Mary, is only an apostle of Allah and His Word which He conveyed unto Mary, and a Spirit from Him.* (*4:171*)**

So, in addition to being called the Word of God, Jesus ('a) is also called the Spirit of God, and in some of the narrations reported in the Shi'i tradition, this title is used.

Of course, the interpretation of the *logos* in Christian theology differs markedly from the interpretation of the *kalimah* by Muslim scholars. For the Christian, according to the Gospel of John, the Word was God and the Word became flesh. For the Muslim, on the other hand, the Word is creature, even while it is the creative principle, for it is in God's utterance of the word "Be!" that creation takes place.

To call Christ the Word of Allah is not to deify him, but to verify his status as prophet. Because of his high status as prophet, Jesus ('a) becomes a complete manifestation of God, one who conveys the message of God, one who can speak on behalf of God, and thus, the Word of God.

Jesus ('a) becomes the Word of God not because of an incarnation whereby his flesh becomes divine,

but because his spirit is refined to such an extent that it becomes a mirror whereby divinity comes to be known. The temple is holy not because of any inherent sanctity in the structure, but because it is the place of the worship of God.

The differences between Islamic and Christian thinking about Jesus (‘a) are as important as they are subtle. Both accept the virgin birth, although it is ironic that a growing number of liberal Christians have come to have doubts about this miracle while Muslims remain steadfast! Among the other miracles attributed to Jesus (‘a) in the Glorious Qur’an are the revival of the dead and the creation of a bird from clay, but all of the miracles performed by Jesus (‘a) are expressly *by the permission of Allah*.

Just as in the miracle of his birth, Jesus (‘a) came into the world by a human mother and divine spirit, so too, his miracles are performed as human actions with divine permission. In this regard the error of the Christians is explained by the great Sufi theoretician, Ibn al–‘Arabi, as follows:

This matter has led certain people to speak of incarnation and to say that, in reviving the dead, he is God. Therefore, since they conceal God, Who in reality revives the dead, in the human form of Jesus, He has said,

They are concealers [***unbelievers***] ***who say that God is the Messiah, son of Mary.*** (***5:72***)[1]

The point is that Muslims can find God in Jesus (‘a) without deifying him, and furthermore that deifying Jesus (‘a) is really an obstacle to their finding God in Jesus (‘a), for deification is an obstacle to searching in Jesus (‘a) for anything beyond him.

One of the central questions of Christian theology is: “Who was Jesus Christ?” The formulation of answers to this question is called *Christology*. In this area of theology, Christians have debated the significance of the historical Jesus as opposed to the picture of Jesus presented in the traditions of the Christian Churches and the Biblical understanding of Jesus.

The time has come for Muslims to begin work in this area, as well. Through the development of an Islamic Christology we can come to a better understanding of Islam as contrasted with Christianity, and Islam in consonance with Christianity, too. Indeed, the first steps in this direction are laid out for us in the Qur’an itself, in the verses mentioned above and others.

Contemporary work toward an Islamic Christology is scarce. Christian authors have tended to stress the salvific function of Jesus (‘a) which seems to have no place in Islam, which leads to questions of religious pluralism when Christians ask one another whether Christ (‘a) can be the savior of Muslims and others who are not Christians.

Christians should be reminded that Muslims accept Jesus (‘a) as savior, along with all the other prophets, for the prophetic function is to save humanity from the scourge of sin by conveying the message of guidance revealed by God. The important difference between Islam and Christianity here is

not over the issue of whether Jesus (‘a) saves, but how he saves. Islam denies that salvation is through redemption resulting from the crucifixion, and instead turns its attention to the instruction provided in the life of the prophets (‘a).

Christian scholarship on Jesus as presented in Islam tends to ignore *hadith* and focus on the Qur’an. Often the research is polemical as authors attempt to support an interpretation of the Qur’an that is more in keeping with Christian than Islamic doctrine. A general review and introduction to this work may be found in Neal Robinson’s *Christ in Islam and Christianity*.[2]2

Muslims, on the other hand, have tended to produce their own polemical works showing how much of what is in the Bible is consistent with the Islamic view of Christ (‘a) as prophet rather than as a person of the Trinity.[3] Ahmad Deedat’s work along these lines has attracted much attention.

More profound insights into the differences between Islam and other faiths, including Christianity, may be found in the writings of Frithjof Schuon, Shaykh ‘Isa Nur al-Din Ahmad, who presents the beginnings of a genuine Christology from a Sufi perspective in his *Islam and the Perennial Philosophy*.[4]

In his *The Muslim Jesus : Sayings and Stories in Islamic Literature*, Tarif Khalidi has collected Islamic references to Jesus from the eighth to the 18th centuries, including mystical works, historical texts about prophets and saints and selections from the *hadith* and Qur’an.[5] As Khalidi notes, these writings, form the largest body of texts relating to Jesus in any non-Christian literature.

These days there is much discussion of dialogue between different faith communities. Conferences have been held for this purpose in the Islamic Republic of Iran as well as in Africa, Europe and the United States.

Perhaps one of the best ways Christians can find common ground for discussion with Muslims is to become familiar with the portrait of Jesus (‘a) presented in Islamic sources, the most important of which are the Qur’an and *ahadith*, and for the latter, no matter what one’s religious orientation, it must be admitted that the narrations handed down through the Household of the Prophet (S) deserve careful attention.

For those of us who have the honour of being counted among the Shi‘ah, the importance of what has been related by the *Ahl al-Bayt* weighs especially heavily, as it should, according to the famous *hadith al-thaqalayn*, in which the Prophet (S),in the last year of his life, is reported to have said:

Verily, I am leaving with you two weighty things (thaqalayn): the Book of Allah and my kindred, my household, for indeed, the two of them will never separate until they return to me by the Pond [of Kauthar on the Last Day].

Perhaps some Christians will be dismissive of what is said of Jesus (‘a) in the Islamic narrations because the main debate about contemporary Christology among Christians is whether research about

the historical Jesus (‘a)is relevant to religion, or whether knowledge of Jesus (‘a)requires attention to the role he plays in the Church and in theology.

The Islamic narrations, coming centuries after the life of Christ (‘a)(and in some cases more than a century after the life of Muhammad (S)) will likely be dismissed by liberal Christians in pursuit of a portrait of Jesus (‘a) based on the standards of historical research currently accepted in the West. The neo-orthodox Christian claims that the Savoir is not to be found in history, but in the Church, so it will not be surprising if he displays no interest in what Islam has to say about Christ (‘a).

However, the Christian may find that the Islamic perspective illuminates a middle ground between the historian’s emphasis on the natural and the ecclesiastical emphasis on the supernatural. The humanity of Jesus (‘a) is evident in the narrations of the Shi‘ah, but it is a humanity transformed, a perfected humanity, and as such there is no denying its supernatural dimension.

The Muslim always seems to appear as a stranger to the Christian, but perhaps it is from the stranger that the Christian can best come to know his savoir. The crucifix has hung in the Church for so long that it becomes difficult for the Christian to find significance there.

The attraction of the quest for the historical Jesus is that it provides a fresh look at the subject, even if that quest is marred by naturalistic presumptions inimical to the religious outlook. By trying to see Jesus (‘a)as the Muslim sees him, the Christian may find his savoir come to life, lifted up to God in his own inner life rather than crucified.[6]

If we have given reason for Christians to study the narrations of the Shi‘ah about Jesus (‘a), the question of the value of such study for Muslims remains. Some might wonder why, when we have the Qur’an and *sunnah*, we should be especially interested in Jesus (‘a).

To begin with, Jesus (‘a), along with the prophets Noah, Abraham, Moses, Peace be with them, and Muhammad (S) has a special status in Islam as one of the greatest prophets, the *ulu’ al-‘azm,* the prophets who brought the divine law.

What was revealed to the last of them is a confirmation of what was revealed to the others. The truth of the revelation is not to be found in its particularity but in its universality, and we come to understand this best when we understand the teachings of all the prophets (‘a). Is this not why so much attention is given to the previous prophets in the Qur’an?

All of the prophets (‘a) have brought a gospel of love, love of God and love of neighbour and love even for the meanest of His creatures. So, in the reports narrated below we find Jesus (‘a) giving some of his food to the creatures of the sea.

At the same time, however, this love is not to be confused with a sentimentalism which would prevent the execution of the divine law. Jesus (‘a) found fault with the Pharisees not because of their regard for

the exterior forms of religion, but because of their disregard for its interior forms, that is, because of their hypocrisy.7

The Words of the Spirit of Allah reported in the selections that follow are primarily concerned with morals. These are Christian morals and at the same time Islamic morals. Today Christendom is in a state of moral upheaval. Peculiarly modern ideas of what is right and wrong have found their way into the theologians' understandings of ethics.

Significant areas of agreement are difficult to find. The simple morality taught by Jesus ('a) and which continues to be emphasized in Islam resonates in the narrations of the Shi'ah. While excessive asceticism is forbidden, we are to turn, like Jesus ('a), away from the world to find refuge in God.

From the following narrations we not only become reacquainted with the moral teachings of Jesus ('a) and with his character, but we also discover what the dear friends of Allah, the Household of the Prophet (S) found it important to transmit about him, and thereby we get a glimpse into their moral teachings and characters, too.

1. Ibn al-'Arabi, The Bezels of Wisdom (Fusus al-Hikam), tr. R. W. J. Austin (Lahore: Suhail, 1988), p. 177.
2. Neal Robinson, Christ in Islam and Christianity (Albany: SUNY, 1991), ch. 2. This work also contains an excellent survey of how Muslim historians and apologists have approached issues pertaining to Christ and Christianity, and an examination of various exegeses of the Qur'an on the verses about Jesus.
3. For example, see Ahmed Deedat, Was Jesus Crucified? (Chicago: Kazi, 1992).
4. Frithjof Schuon, Islam and the Perennial Philosophy (Lahore: Suhail, 1985).
5. Tarif Khalidi, the Muslim Jesus: Sayings and Stories in Islamic Literature (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003).
6. We are reminded by the glorious Qur'an: "Recall when God said: 'O Jesus, I will take you away and lift you up to Me.'". (3:54)
7. Cf. Matt. 23:25.

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