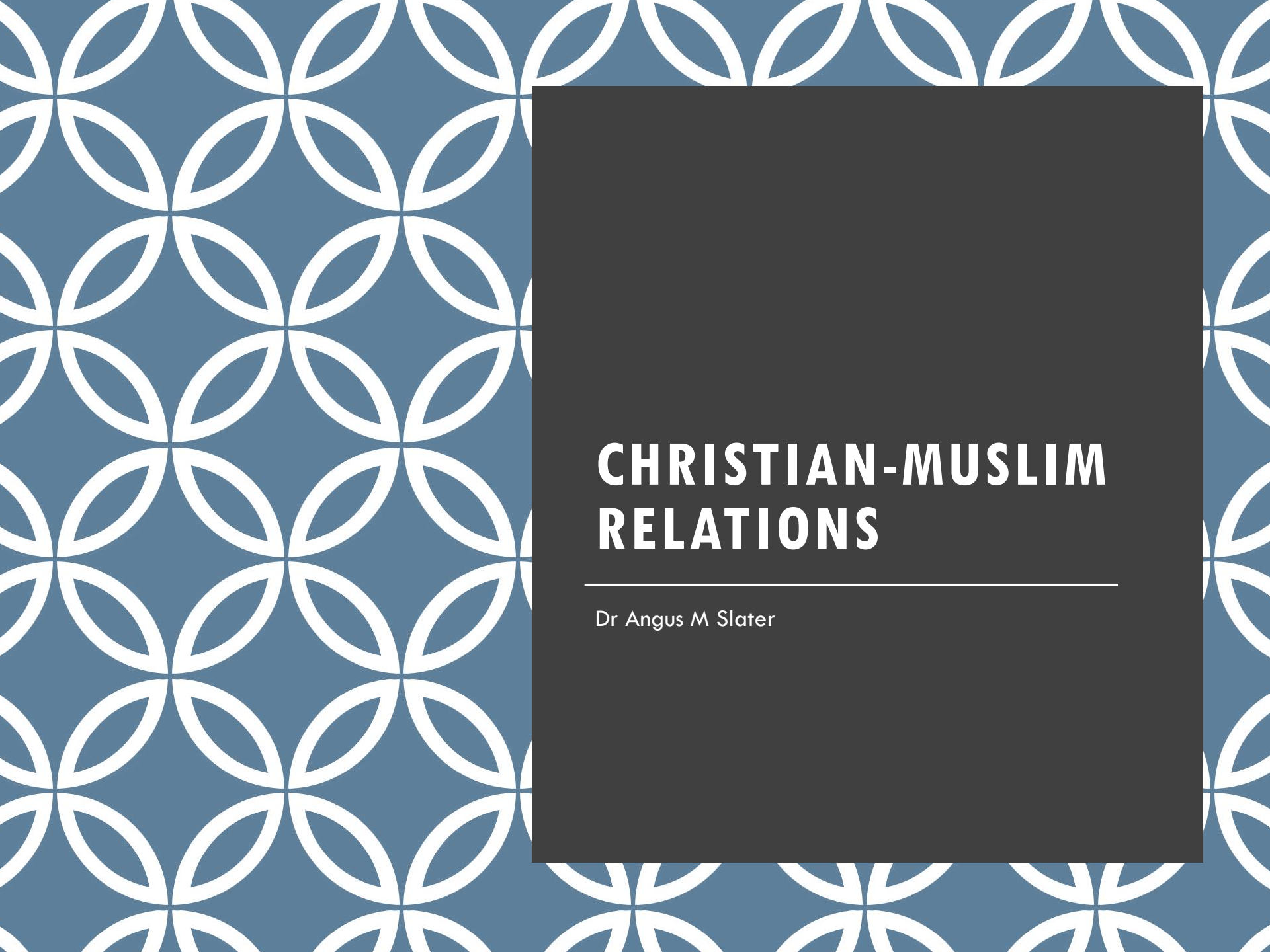




CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM RELATIONS

Dr Angus M Slater



REVISION

In the previous section, we took the time to examine the critical function of the person of Jesus within the Christian tradition, looking at some of the key characteristics that make his word and actions so central to the narratives of Christianity.

In doing so, we examined the pre-existence of Jesus, the relationship between Jesus, Christ, and Word, the reading of prophecy in earlier scriptural material as referring to Jesus, and his location within pre-existing religious structures of the time.

In addition, we saw the centrality of the last few weeks of Jesus' life – his trial, execution, resurrection, and ascension – and the important theological roles that these events play in the broader Christian story.

This material should stand us in good stead for this coming section, where we will examine in more detail the narratives around Jesus, or Isa, in the Islamic tradition – allowing us to identify key points of similarity and difference between them.



REVISION

In the previous section, you were asked to select a section of 'Shared Stories, Rival Tellings' by R Gregg.

In this volume there were five parts each addressing a shared story or character between the Christian and Islamic tradition and exploring the similarities and differences in their descriptions and roles in the differing traditions.

In reading whichever part appealed to you, I hope you had the opportunity to explore some of the ways in which these shared stories operate as both a bridge and barrier to forms of dialogue between Christianity and Islam – as well as between both and the Jewish tradition.

What we are doing in this module around these topics will be assisted by any study you choose to undertake in Christian-Jewish or Muslim-Jewish Relations.



ISA — ISLAMIC NARRATIVES



ISA — ISLAMIC NARRATIVES

In this section, we move on from solely Christian descriptions of Jesus and begin to put them alongside similar descriptions from within the Islamic tradition. In doing so, we will not only be looking at the descriptions of acts performed by Isa, but also to the role that Isa plays within the broader theological edifice of the Islamic tradition, as well as the way in which Isa's role relates to roles played by other proximate shared characters, like Mary / Maryam.

We have already seen in the previous sections, that belief, either where it is the same or where it differs, can have a huge influence on the nature of interaction between communities which subscribe to them, and, in turn, that changes in community relations can cause changes in that way that shared beliefs are read and understood. This is even more prominent where the beliefs are about a shared figure, held in high-esteem by both traditions.

It is for this reason — the similarity of belief, but the importance of the distinctions for both traditions, that we end this theological exploration of Muslim-Christian relations with Jesus / Isa.

ISA AND MARYAM IN THE QUR'AN

ISA IN THE QUR'AN

Jesus, or *Isa ibn Maryam*'s, appearance in the Qur'an is the foundation of the shared narratives surrounding him between Islam and Christianity. While the bare outlines of the story are similar (born to a virgin, the claiming messiah-ship, miracles and teaching, rejection by the populace, and assumption to heaven) there are significant difference we will explore – over matters of crucifixion and death, as well as identification with the divine.

We will be examining most of these areas (except his death, which will be covered in the set readings) in this section.

Even with these differences, the placement of Jesus in the Qur'an is exceptionally prominent – referred to directly 25 times, he is one of the most mentioned figures in the Qur'anic text.



ISA IN THE QUR'AN

Most prominent of the characteristics developed in the mentions of Jesus in the Qur'an is his placement among the preceding prophets of Islam, such as:

Q2:87 - And verily We gave unto Moses the Scripture and We caused a train of messengers to follow after him, and We gave unto Jesus, son of Mary, clear proofs (of Allah's sovereignty), and We supported him with the Holy spirit. Is it ever so, that, when there cometh unto you a messenger (from Allah) with that which ye yourselves desire not, ye grow arrogant, and some ye disbelieve and some ye slay?



ISA IN THE QUR'AN

Q2:136 - Say (O Muslims): We believe in Allah and that which is revealed unto us and that which was revealed unto Abraham, and Ishmael, and Isaac, and Jacob, and the tribes, and that which Moses and Jesus received, and that which the prophets received from their Lord. We make no distinction between any of them, and unto Him we have surrendered.

Given what we have addressed in the historical narrative through the previous sections, we should be able to see why this assertion of Jesus' prophethood (and Muhammad's following it) is a central aspect of the role that Jesus plays in the Islamic tradition – he is a precursor to the revelation of Muhammad.

This is what makes the birth narrative of Jesus and parts of the passion of Jesus so central to Islamic tellings of the Jesus story.



ISA IN THE QUR'AN

The birth narrative is a particularly prominent aspect of Jesus' role in the Islamic tradition. It also a useful place to identify the differing influence from different forms of the Christian scripture that they have had on the building of the Islamic infancy, and Jesus, narratives.

We can see, from looking at the biographical details included or excluded from the Qur'anic narrative, that the Qur'anic story is largely derived from the texts of the Gospels of John and Luke, with no material from Matthew.

For example, only Luke has references to Zechariah and Elizabeth, the parents of John the Baptist, who also occur in the Qur'anic text – in Luke, the angel Gabriel visits both in turn to deliver news of their upcoming birth. Similarly, in the Qur'anic narrative, the angle Gabriel provides them with appropriate revelation.



MARYAM IN THE QUR'AN

It is difficult to talk about the place of Jesus in the Qur'an without talking about the place of Mary, or Maryam, in the Qur'an such is the close identification between them and the prominence Mary holds in the overall narrative.

The 19th Surah of the Qur'an is named Maryam, after Mary, and contains the story of the birth of John the Baptist, seen as the precursor to Jesus, and the story of Mary, the mother of Jesus.

The 3rd Surah of the Qur'an is named Al Imran, after Mary's father, and refers to his family as a whole as well as the conception of the Mary, mother of Jesus.



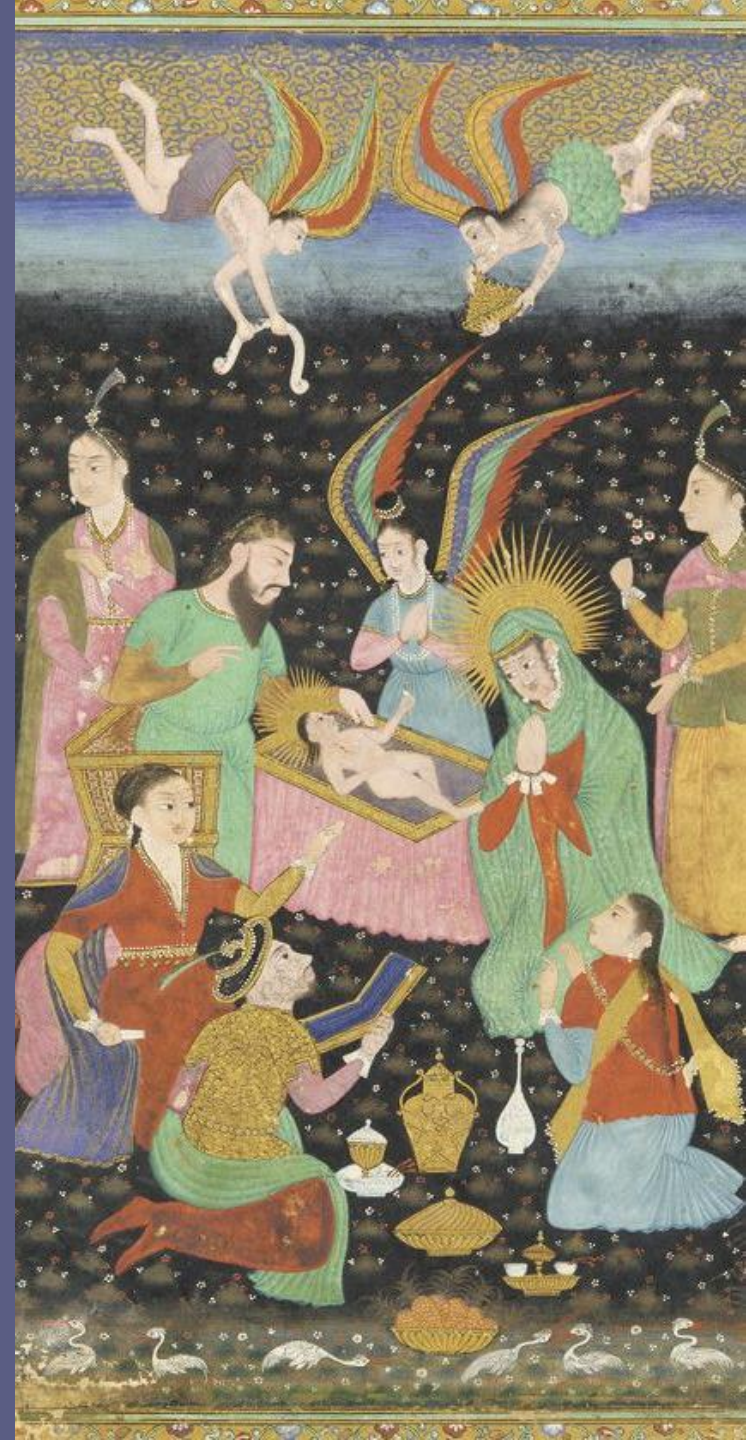
MARYAM IN THE QUR'AN

Indeed, so prominent is this role, that as an individual **Mary occurs more in the Qur'an than she does in any of the Gospel accounts – 34 times.**

Also, she is the only woman to be referred to directly by her name in the Qur'anic text – with others usually appearing as the “wife of...” another character in the narrative.

Her individual story and birth are prominently placed as an integral part of the narrative surrounding the work of Jesus, as is her exemplary nature:

Q3:42 - And when the angels said: O Mary! Lo! Allah hath chosen thee and made thee pure, and hath preferred thee above (all) the women of creation.



ISA AS THE WORD

THE INFANCY GOSPEL OF JAMES

A significant part of the Qur'anic references to Isa and Maryam occur in the context of the infancy narrative, that is the story of Christ's birth, that is similar to extra-canonical accounts from the Christian tradition – particularly the Infancy Gospel of James.

This work, emerging in the late 2nd century, has been a significant influence on Christian and Islamic beliefs about Jesus, and Mary, despite being canonically rejected in the early 400's.

Most importantly, the Infancy Gospel extends the story of Christ's birth back to the birth of Mary, his mother, and includes biographical detail about Mary, Zechariah the father of John the Baptist, and places a strong stress on the purity and virginity of Mary throughout her life.



THE INFANCY GOSPEL OF JAMES

This strong stress on Mary and her purity is a key theme in Islamic portrayals of Isa, with Joseph, considered in the Christian tradition to be Jesus' father, being significantly relegated in importance.

Indeed, the text of the Qur'an never mentions Joseph (and references, such as Surah 12, are to Joseph, son of Jacob), and never distinguishes Jesus' father at all.

Rather, Isa is continuously referred to as 'Son of Mary' throughout the Qur'anic text, with no implications of male descent – something that matches the context of the Infancy Gospel of James, which stresses the purity of the Virgin Birth. This can be seen in the description given of Jesus birth in the Qur'an:

Q3:59 - Lo! the likeness of Jesus with Allah is as the likeness of Adam. He created him of dust, then He said unto him: Be! and he is.



THE WORD

This role for Mary in the Islamic tradition is prophetic in character, being the receiver and deliverer of a revelation of the divine. In this, she is perhaps just as central to the story the Islamic tradition tells about Isa, as Isa is himself.

This is because the nature of Isa, is consistently referred to and situated as a form of revelation itself. We can see this in the overlapping references to Isa as a 'word' in the Qur'anic text, but also in pre-existing Christian narratives.

Q3:45 - (And remember) when the angels said: O Mary! Lo! Allah giveth thee glad tidings of a word from him, whose name is the Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary, illustrious in the world and the Hereafter, and one of those brought near (unto Allah).



THE WORD

This framing of Isa's role as a form of revelation combines aspects from two particularly prominent Christian themes found in the Gospel of John and the Gospel of Luke:

John 1:1-5 - In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

Luke 1:35-38 - The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. For no word from God will ever fail." "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled." Then the angel left her.



THE WORD

In the Qur'anic narrative these two instances and forms of 'word' from God blend together into a narrative and theological whole – the 'word' of John and the 'word of glad tidings' of Luke.

This is developed further through the Angel Gabriel bringing the word 'be' to Mary, causing Isa to be formed within Mary's womb – Isa is therefore formed solely by the word of God.

This special category of creation / prophethood / word-ness sets Isa somewhat apart from more regular identifications of prophethood in the Qur'an – for example, Isa is the only prophet of all those considered to receive revelation from Allah, that heals and raises the dead through his works.



MINISTRY

There are various later accounts of parts of Isa's ministry that also reveal textual similarities, but also theological similarities between the Christian and Islamic traditions. An example of this is the Qur'anic reference to Isa healing the sick and raising the dead and its similarity to passage of Luke (and Matthew):

Q3:49 - ...I heal him who was born blind, and the leper, and I raise the dead, by Allah's leave.

Luke 7:32 - ...The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor.



THE CLAY BIRDS

The implications of this are tied to the implications of Isa as a prominent representation of, or reference to, the revelation of the divine in his person and birth. This can be seen in the same Qur'anic passage which mirrors non-canonical accounts of Jesus' early life in the Infancy Gospel of Thomas, a series of miracle tales, eg:

Q3:49 - And will make him a messenger unto the Children of Israel, (saying): Lo! I come unto you with a sign from your Lord. Lo! I fashion for you out of clay the likeness of a bird, and I breathe into it and it is a bird, by Allah's leave.



THE CLAY BIRDS

IGT 2:1-6 - When the boy Jesus was five years old, he was playing in a narrow part of a rushing stream. He was gathering the flowing waters into ponds, and immediately they were made clean, and he ordered these things with a single word. And after he made clay, he moulded twelve sparrows from it. And it was the Sabbath when he did these things. But there were also many other children playing with him.

Then, a certain Jew saw what Jesus was doing while playing on the Sabbath. Immediately, he departed and reported to Jesus' father, Joseph, "Look, your child is in the stream and he took clay and formed twelve birds and profaned the Sabbath?"

And Joseph went to the area and when he saw him, he shouted, "Why are you doing these things that are not permitted on the Sabbath?"

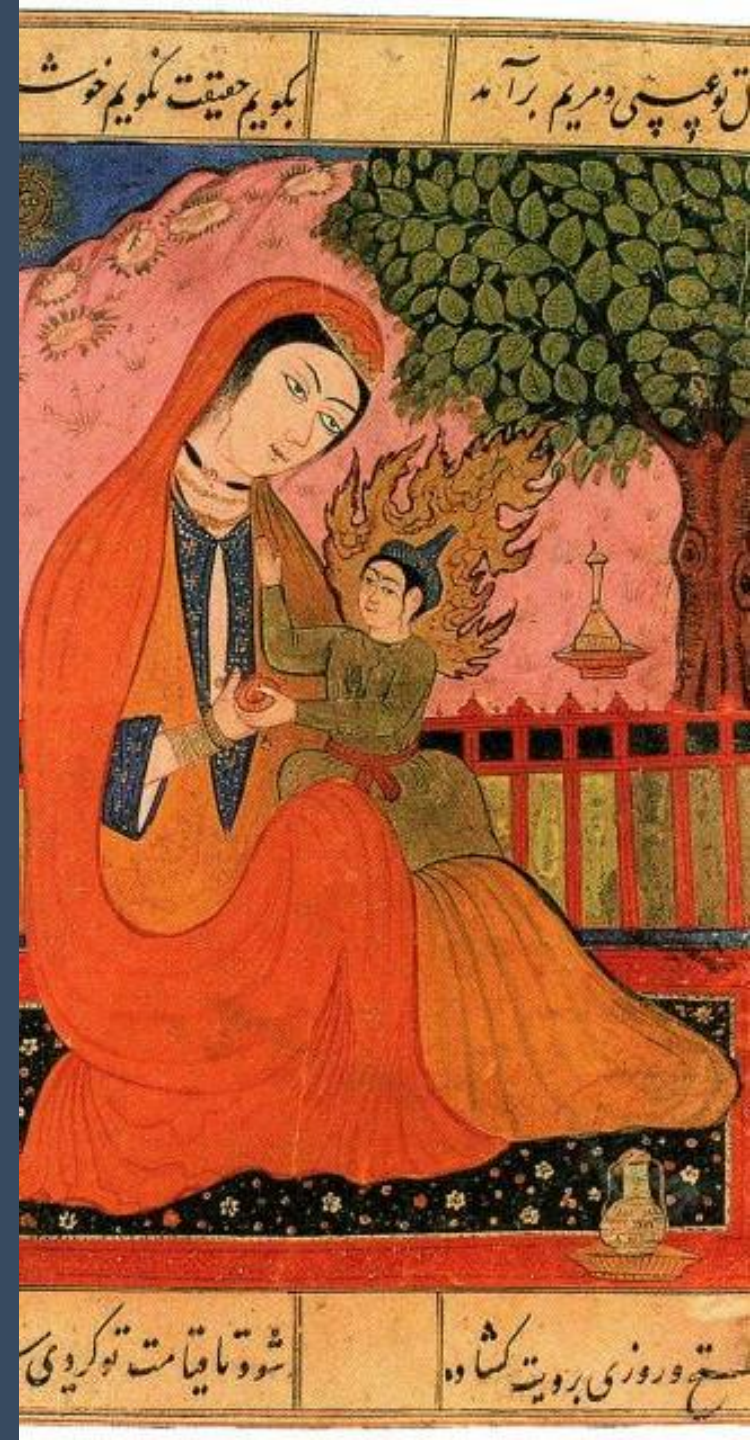
Jesus, however, clapped his hands and shouted to the sparrows, "Depart, fly, and remember me now that you are alive." And the sparrows departed shrieking.



SPEAKING FROM THE CRADLE

Similarly, there is a Qur'anic passage describing Isa talking as a child – again connecting aspects of the narrative of Isa to his association with the divine word. This is again a mirror of extra-canonical material that displays influences from both religious traditions, the Syriac Infancy Gospel, but is placed and used differently. For example:

Q3:46 - *He will speak unto mankind in his cradle and in his manhood, and he is of the righteous.*



SPEAKING FROM THE CRADLE

SIG 019:039- - Then she pointed to him. They said: How can we talk to one who is in the cradle, a young boy?

He spake: Lo! I am the slave of Allah. He hath given me the Scripture and hath appointed me a Prophet, And hath made me blessed wheresoever I may be, and hath enjoined upon me prayer and almsgiving so long as I remain alive, And (hath made me) dutiful toward her who bore me, and hath not made me arrogant, unblest.

Peace on me the day I was born, and the day I die, and the day I shall be raised alive! Such was Jesus, son of Mary: (this is) a statement of the truth concerning which they doubt.

It befitteth not (the Majesty of) Allah that He should take unto Himself a son. Glory be to Him! When He decreeth a thing, He saith unto it only: Be! and it is.



ISA AS THE WORD

In the Gospel of John, Jesus as the 'word' causes all things to come into being through him (being pre-existent and present at Creation), and those things that come into being through him have true life (being creations of the divine). In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus is the 'word' given to Mary that pre-empt his birth.

In the Qur'anic narrative, as we have seen, these two forms blend together — Jesus is depicted as creating life in his childhood and speaking from the cradle, delivering his 'word' in both speech and actions.

The person of Isa, his exact nature and relation to Allah, is somewhat difficult to divine in the Qur'anic narrative but his location, along with his mother, as deliverers of the divine word is absolutely central to any discussion of the place of Jesus in Islam.



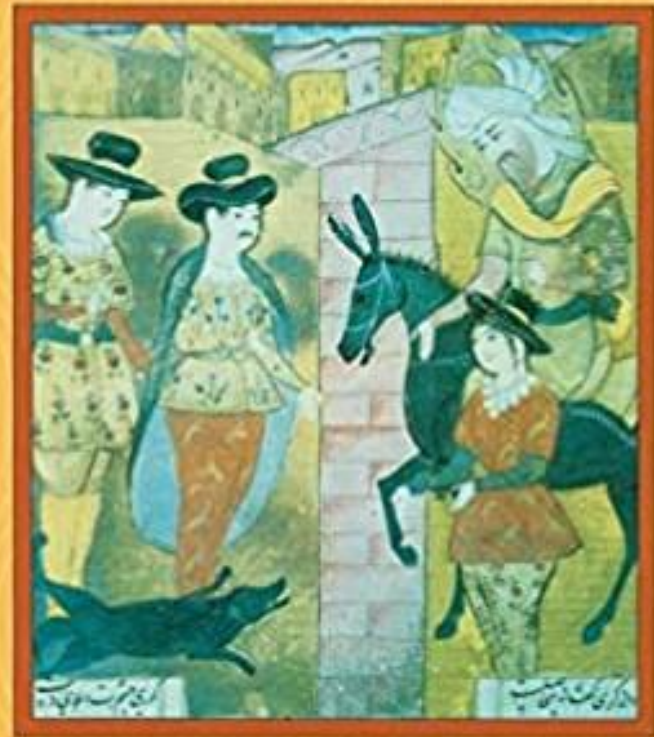
POPULAR RELIGIOUS KNOWLEDGE

POPULAR RELIGIOUS KNOWLEDGE

Of course, the Qur'anic narrative is not the only source of information about Isa in the Islamic tradition, with a number of references existing in the Hadith literature and within Islamic popular religious culture.

If you are interested in the overlap of Isa / Jesus between the Christian and Islamic traditions, I would heartily recommend picking up *The Muslim Jesus: Sayings and Stories in Islamic Literature* by Tarif Khalidi from Amazon – for £20 – as it contains a great collection of the popular religious narratives about Jesus and will provide you with a solid insight not only into the content of these narratives, but also the role that this form of popular religious knowledge and belief plays in the interactions between religious traditions.

The Muslim Jesus



SAYINGS AND STORIES IN ISLAMIC LITERATURE

Edited and Translated by

Tarif Khalidi

POPULAR RELIGIOUS KNOWLEDGE

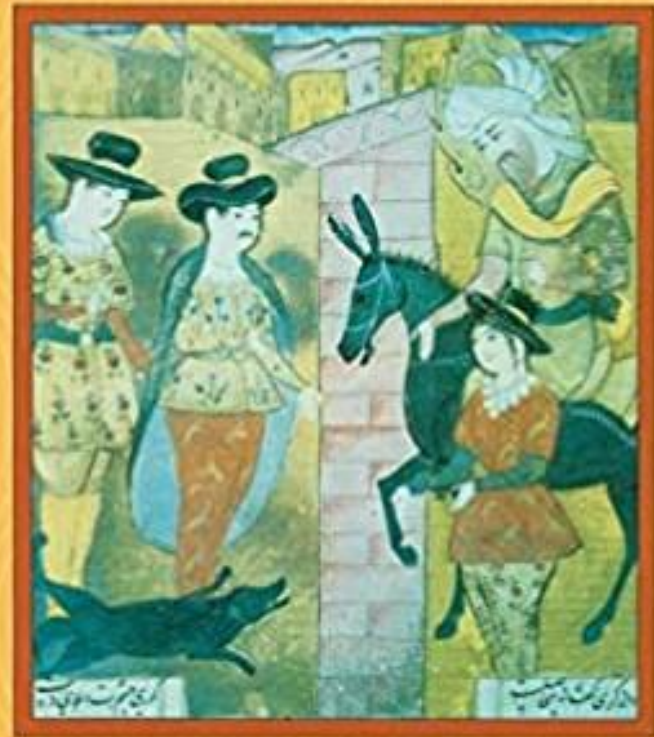
An example of this is a reference to the text of the Gospel of Luke, which transposes and inverts the discussion had from an expression of anger, to an inability to suppress anger – an interesting flip of association that reveals an aspect of the character of Jesus / Isa that is not commonly delved into:

K39 - Jesus met John and said to him, "Admonish me." John said, "Avoid feeling anger." Jesus said, "This I cannot do."

Luke 12:49 - [Jesus said] "I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!"

In this section, and the last, we have examined only some areas of interesting overlap and parallel between the portrayals of Jesus / Isa in the Christian and Islamic traditions there are many more and great deal of further depth to be explored.

The Muslim Jesus



SAYINGS AND STORIES IN ISLAMIC LITERATURE

Edited and Translated by

Jarif Khalidi

READINGS

READINGS

Our readings in this section extend the consideration we have given in the previous two sections into a very important area for Muslim-Christian dialogue about the figure of Jesus / Isa. This is the different interpretations of his death, where the two traditions fundamentally disagree on the nature of events that occur and their theological meaning. For Christianity, the death of Christ is of supreme importance, allowing for salvation and being intimately tied to matters like the Incarnation, while in the Islamic tradition, Isa does not die but is assumed to heaven.

The first of your readings addresses and explores this issue, allowing you to engage with it on your own terms. There are then two further readings, one looking at the Incarnation specifically and the other looking at the role of Mary, which relate to this discussion over the death of Christ.

The last read attempts to return us to some of the broader, methodological, questions we have looked at – such as how religious traditions move from texts or stories to theologies or systems of belief.

READINGS

Neely B. At cross purposes: Islam and the crucifixion of Christ, a theological response. *Transformation*. 2017;34(3):176-213.

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Rezazadeh M. Mary in Early Christianity and Islam. *Religious Enquiries*. 2017;6(11): 37-49.

Renard, John. "Chapter Three: Story to Creed" in *Islam and Christianity: Theological Themes In Comparative Perspective*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011