

IS JESUS GOD?

An explanation of the divinity and humanity
of Jesus for Christians and Muslims

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Engaging
with
Islam

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Is Jesus God? - An explanation of the divinity and humanity of Jesus for Christians and Muslims

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Introduction

Who is Jesus? This is a question that Christians and Muslims often discuss and disagree about. For Christians, Jesus is understood to be both fully God and fully man in what is called the doctrine of the *incarnation*. The word incarnation is a Latin word that means *in flesh*, and it refers to God coming to us, in flesh, as a man. The doctrine of the incarnation states that Jesus has both a human created nature and a divine uncreated nature, that is, one person with two natures. For Muslims, Jesus is a great man, a prophet, but only a man. Therefore we have two very different understandings of Jesus.

This booklet seeks to give a Christian defence for the belief that Jesus is both fully God and fully man. The approach will be to work through a series of concepts that provide the foundation for understanding how this belief makes logical sense, and fits what the scriptures say. As we consider each of these foundations we will take steps towards the incarnation and address many of our assumptions along the way.

If you are a Christian, and a Muslim asks you to explain how Jesus can be God, you may like to read this booklet with them and work through the steps together.

Finally, when we consider the incarnation we are considering how the transcendent God interacts with his creation. This is an enormous subject, therefore we must not trivialise it, but understand that it requires effort, and give it the proper respect and effort it is due.

Where do we start?

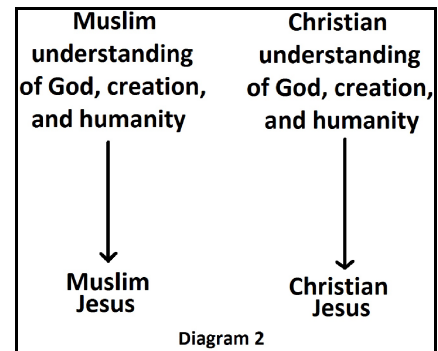
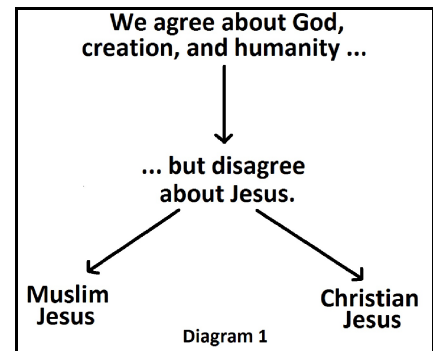
A common mistake Christians make when talking to Muslims about the divinity and humanity of Jesus is to *start* with Jesus. We assume that Christians and Muslims agree about God, creation, and humanity, and only differ when it comes to Jesus, and so we argue about him (diagram 1).

However, Christians and Muslims actually have a different understanding of God, creation, and humanity, and it is because of these differences that we have a different understanding of Jesus; it is because of these differences that the doctrine of the incarnation seems reasonable to a Christian but wrong and illogical to a Muslim (diagram 2).

This means if Christians and Muslims want to understand each other and make progress in our discussions about Jesus, we first need to talk about our understanding of God, creation, and humanity. In particular we need to discuss how God relates to creation and what it means to be human, after this we can proceed to discuss Jesus. As we discuss our understanding of God, creation, and humanity, we will find out what we share in common, and any significant differences we need to discuss. In this booklet we are going to do this by considering the following subjects:

- God and Creation
- God as he is in himself and God as he is towards us.
- God dwelling with his people.
- The Image of God

After considering these foundational subjects we will then turn to the testimony of scripture regarding Jesus. But before we do this I need to explain where Christians get their understanding of God, creation, and humanity from. This is the subject of the next chapter entitled *What is the Bible?*



What is the Bible?

What is the Bible? What is this book that Christians get their beliefs from, and in particular this belief about the incarnation.

It is common for people to assume that the Bible and the Qur'an are basically the same, and that just as Christians get their beliefs from one book, the Bible, so too Muslims get their beliefs from one book, the Qur'an. But this is not the case. The Bible and Qur'an are very different at one major point: what they contain.

The Bible is not one book but a collection of many books from different prophets, from different locations, in different languages, over about a 1500 year period. It contains the Law of Moses (Torah), the Psalms of David, the books of Solomon, the books of the prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi, and others. It has the Gospel of Jesus recorded by Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, and the writings of the apostles of Jesus.

THE BIBLE			
Law of Moses (Torah)	The Books of the Prophets	The Psalms	The Gospel
<----- c. 1500 years ----->			

Why do Christians have all these books in the Bible? The answer is simple: Christians accept all the prophets and make no distinction between them, therefore, they have all these books in the Bible so they can read them. What Christians believe about God comes from reading all of the books of the prophets.

When God reveals himself to us it is not a matter of dumping data as fast as possible, rather, to reveal a person requires time, and because it requires time it is progressive. We see this in the Torah where God revealed more of himself to Moses than he did to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob:

God also said to Moses, "I am the LORD. I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob as God Almighty, but by my name the LORD (Yahweh) I did not make myself known to them." (Exodus 6:2-3)

Over a long period of time God has spoken through the prophets and progressively explained his name, his actions in history, provided us with concepts to understand him, given us laws to live by, given us ways to approach him, made promises for the future, and the promise to reveal more of himself to us. The Torah, Prophets, Psalms, and Gospel, are the word of God through which God has progressively revealed himself to us over this period of time.

These books build on each other, they are meant to be read together, and together they give us God's complete message. What Christians believe about God comes from reading all of the books of the prophets.

Islam is very different at this point because the Qur'an only contains what Muhammad recited. Thus, what Muslims believe about God comes from one man and not from reading all the books of the prophets. Muslims may say that Muhammad recited the word of God, but the point remains, Islam is still based on one man and what he says to believe about the other prophets. Muslims do not read the books of the other prophets but only Muhammad.

THE QUR'AN
Muhammad
<----- 23 years ----->

In this way Islam is identical to the Bahai religion, which likewise is based on *one* man who recited to his followers what they are to believe about God, the prophets and their message.

This is an important step we need to be clear about. The Christian understanding of the incarnation, like other Christian beliefs, does not come from *one* man but from the progressive revelation God has given through *all* the prophets.

God and Creation

When Christians say that God became a man it is common for Muslims to think that Christians are saying that God changed; that God changed from being uncreated, infinite, and eternal, into a created, finite, temporal being. The following quote shows this understanding.

[*At-Taftazani states:*] (Christians) claim that the divine being changed from His essence and manifested Himself in the body of Jesus. They therefore allowed change and dissociation from oneself in the essence of God. So the divine being in their view was subject to change. (Muhammad Salih Farfur, *The Beneficial Message & The Definitive Proof in the Study of Theology*, (Trans: Wesam Charkawi) 2010, p. 95.)

And since God does not change, the incarnation is seen by Muslims as illogical, impossible, absurd, and a compromise of God's unchanging eternal nature.

However, Muslim leaders have misunderstood what Christians are saying. We are not saying that God changed from one nature to another, instead we are saying that Jesus has *two* natures: one divine and one human. The divine nature was not changed, but God *connected* personally with, and took to himself, a human nature.

Therefore, the question for Christians and Muslims is not: Can God change? The question is: Can God connect with creation the way Christians say? Can a transcendent, uncreated, infinite, and eternal God connect with a created, finite, and temporal creation? Is it reasonable to believe that a divine and created nature can be connected in the way Christians say they are in the person of Jesus? The answer to these questions is yes because every time God interacts with creation, in any way, two natures connect. Consider these examples:

The Act of Creating. The first place God interacts with creation is in creating it. Here we have the transcendent and uncreated God bringing creation into being from nothing by the power of his word. That is, we have two different natures with some type of connection between them. If there is no connection then God did not responsible for creation. Does this connection change or compromise God's nature? No. Therefore in the act of creating we see two natures connected and neither is compromised.

Sustaining Creation. Not only did God create all things but he also sustains the existence of all things. We continue to exist because God continues to sustain

our existence and will do so even into the resurrection which will be everlasting. Here we see God's divine nature permanently connect in some way with a created nature. If there is no connection then God is not sustaining us. Does this connection change or compromise God's nature? No. Therefore, in God's act of sustaining we see two natures permanently connected and neither is compromised.

Omnipresence. God created all things, sustains all things, and is present throughout creation.

Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. (Psalm 139:7-8)

God is the all-present God. This again involves a divine and created nature being connected in some way. If there is no connection then God is not present. Does this connection change or compromise God's nature? No. Therefore, in God's act of being present we see two natures permanently connected and neither is compromised.

Revelation. God also reveals himself to creation through his word. This again involves a divine and created nature being connected in some way. If there is no connection then there is no revelation of God to us. Does this connection change or compromise God's nature? No. Therefore, in God's act of revealing himself by his word we see two natures connected and neither is compromised.

The point of these examples is to show that every time God interacts with creation a divine and created nature connect.

If you are a Muslim, I want to ask you: Do you believe that God created all things? Do you believe God sustains the existence of all things? Do you believe God is present throughout creation? Do you believe God reveals himself to us through his word? If so then you believe that a divine and created nature can connect in different ways. Therefore you cannot reject the incarnation on the grounds that it is impossible for a divine and created nature to connect in Jesus. The incarnation is reasonable and consistent with how God interacts with creation. This discussion shows how the doctrine of creation is an important foundation for understanding the incarnation.¹

¹ Early in the Church's history there were many discussions about the nature of Jesus and the incarnation. It may appear that these early Christians were arguing about Jesus, but in fact

God as he is in himself and God as He is Towards Us

The next step is to consider the distinction between God as he is in himself and God as he is towards us.

Several Muslims have said to me that Jesus cannot be God because God is all powerful, all knowing, all present, and eternal; God is limitless and infinite and therefore cannot be limited to a finite man. This argument sounds reasonable at first but it fails to understand an important aspect of how God relates to us: There is a difference between God as he is in himself and God as he is *towards us*.

Yes, in himself God is all powerful, but he only expresses a limited amount of his power towards us. Consider creation. In creation we see a *true* display of God's power but it is *limited*. God could have made the universe double this size or half this size or not at all, and in all of these cases he is equally powerful in himself even though he has acted in a limited way towards us.

We see this again when we consider other ways in which God relates to us. Yes, God is all knowing but he does not make all his knowledge known to us. He is eternal yet reveals himself to us in created time. He is the just judge, yet we do not see all his justice expressed in the world now but wait for Judgement Day. He is free to act as he wants yet makes covenants to limit himself to a particular course of faithful action. The point I am making here is that *every* time God interacts with creation he limits himself yet we still see who he truly is.

God expresses himself in a true but limited way to his creation. He *accommodates* himself to his creation so that his creation may know him. This does not at all take away from God's majesty or limit who he is in himself; it just acknowledges the way God expresses himself to us. God's accommodation to us is an important foundation for understanding how Jesus is God because the infinite God is accommodating himself to us in the person of Jesus.

they were arguing about creation and how God interacts with it. Men like Arius and the Docetists had a Neo-Platonic understanding of creation rather than a Biblical understanding. It was this different understanding of creation that lead them to a different understanding of Jesus.

God Dwells with His People

God's plan has always been to personally dwell with his people and for them to know him. This is another important foundation to understand the incarnation.

While God's essence and nature transcend the created order, this transcendence does not mean he is isolated and unknowable to his creation. God created us to dwell and fellowship with him, and he has always created a means of communicating his *person* and *presence* to us. We see this with Adam in the garden:

Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the LORD God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day ... (Genesis 3:8, 4:14)

God was personally present in the garden. Adam could walk and talk with God. How this exactly happened I do not know, but it is clear that God was personally present.

We see this again when God's personal presence dwelt with the nation of Israel.

Then have them make a sanctuary for me, and I will dwell among them. (Exodus 25:8)

God was personally present with Israel in their sanctuary/temple, and coming to the temple was how the Israelites approached God.

Jesus is the fulfilment of the temple. He is the true temple; the true place where God and man meet.

Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days." The Jews replied, "It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and you are going to raise it in three days?" But the temple he had spoken of was his body. (John 2:19-21)

The teaching that God dwells with his people is an idea throughout the Torah, Prophets, Psalms, and Gospel. Christians did not invent this idea; it is the message of all the prophets; and it is a foundational concept for understanding how God dwells in Jesus.

If you are a Muslim you need to decide whether or not God dwells with his people?

The Image of God

In the last three chapters we considered our doctrine of *God*. We considered how God relates to creation, accommodates himself to us, and dwells with his people. We saw that these are foundations for understanding the incarnation. If you are a Muslim I hope that this has helped you to understand the Christian position better. What I want to do now is consider our doctrine of *humanity*, that is, what does it mean to be human?

The Torah, Prophets, Psalms, and Gospel, teach that God made us in his image:

Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground." So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. (Genesis 1:26-27)

What does it mean to be human? It means to be made in the image of God. So what does it mean to be in the image and likeness of God? It means that humans represent God's rule in creation (Gen. 1:26), we are to display his character (Lev. 19:2), and are to share in his glory (Gen. 2:9, 3:22, Ps. 8, 82). That is, God has created a connection between us and him. This is another important foundation for the incarnation. Jesus is the true man who represents God, who displays his character, and who shares in his glory.

However, in the Qur'an, and popular Islamic belief², humanity is not created in the image of God; there is no connection between God and humanity, and no plan for humanity to share in God's glory³. This means Christians and Muslims have a completely different understanding of what it means to be human. It is because we have a different understanding of what it means to be human that we have a different understanding of Jesus.

If you are a Muslim I hope you can appreciate how important the doctrine of the image of God is for understanding the incarnation. The Torah, Prophets, Psalms, and Gospel all teach that we are made in the image of God and this is a foundation for understanding how Jesus is God.

²There is a Sunni hadith (*Sahih Muslim*: bk. 40, no. 6809) about Adam being made in Allah's image 30 meters tall, but this hadith seems to have little theological impact for popular Islam.

³It could be argued that Muhammad shares in Allah's glory but this will not be pursued at the moment.

The Testimony of the Gospel

Having considered the foundations of the incarnation we can now consider the revelation of the incarnation in the person of Jesus. We see this in the Gospel accounts. The Gospels demonstrate the full humanity and full divinity of Jesus.

We see the full humanity of Jesus in that he was born, grew, learned, ate, prayed, suffered, was tempted yet did not sin, died, and rose from the dead.

We see the full divinity of Jesus in that he is:

- The fulfilment of the coming of God in Isaiah 40:2-3, Malachi 3:1 > Mark 1:1-3.
- He does what only God can do.
 - Forgave people their sin, Mark 2:5-7.
 - His presence led to a conviction of sin, Luke 5:8.
 - He calmed the storm, Psalm 107:23-30 > Mark 4:35.
 - Walked on water, creation, flood, Exodus, Job 9:8 > Mark 6:45ff.
 - Commanded spirits, 1 Kings 22 > Mark 5:7-8
 - Chooses who is saved, Matthew 11:27.
- He is the husband to God's people, Isaiah 54:5, Jeremiah 3:14; Ezekiel 16:32, Hosea 1-2 (2:19-20) > Mark 2:19, John 3:29.
- Preexistent, the "I have come" statements in Matthew, Mark, Luke; and John 1:1.
- The Creator John 1:1-3, Colossians 1:16, Hebrews 1:1-3
- And finally Jesus says it: Matthew 26:63-66, Mark 12:35ff, John 5:16-23, 8:58, 10:29-39, 14:8-9, Isaiah 44:6 > Revelation 1:17, 22:13.

In the Gospel we see that Jesus is fully God and fully man. The Gospel holds these two aspects together perfectly.

Often Muslim leaders will refer to Numbers 23:19 where it says that "God is not a man". But this is only half the verse. The full verse says:

God is not a man, that he should lie, nor a son of man, that he should change his mind. Does he speak and then not act? Does he promise and not

fulfill? (Numbers 23:19)

When the whole verse is read it is not saying that Jesus cannot be God but that God is not a liar like men, and that when God makes a promise he keeps his word. The scriptures testify that Jesus is fully God and fully man.

The Incarnation and the Qur'an

Seeing God in Creation

The Qur'an has its own understanding of God being present in creation. On the one hand it affirms that God is transcendent and beyond our sight.

Vision perceives Him not, but He perceives [all] vision (Qur'an 6:103, Saheeh International)

Yet on the other hand it affirms that believers will see God on Judgement Day and that this will be a cause of great joy.

[Some] faces, that Day, will be radiant, looking at their Lord. (Qur'an 75:22-23, Saheeh International).

Thus in the Qur'an there is some understanding of the uncreated, infinite, eternal God being present in some form in temporal, finite creation.

Jesus in the Qur'an

Regarding Jesus we also see two aspects. On the one hand it regularly denies that he is God (5:73-75). Yet on the other hand it speaks of Jesus doing what only God can do. We see this in the Qur'an's account of Jesus creating birds from clay.

One of God's unique attributes is that he is the creator. This is his identity. Being the creator is what defines him and makes him unique to everything else. Yet in the Qur'an we see that Jesus has this unique attribute of God and expresses it in exactly the same way as God.⁴ God created Adam from clay and breathes into him the breath of life:

When your Lord said to the angels, "I shall create mankind from clay. When I have formed him and breathed some of my Spirit into him ... I created (him) with my own hands." (Qur'an 38:71-75, Jones)

⁴ Some people have said to me that Moses created when he threw his staff on the ground and it became a snake (Exodus 4), however, Moses ran from the snake in fear of what God had done. This is completely different to the fable of Jesus who creates in precisely the same way as God did when he created Adam.

And in exactly the same way Jesus creates:

I (Jesus) have come to you with a sign from your Lord. I will create for you out of clay the likeness of a bird; then I will breathe into it, and it will be a bird, by the permission of God. (Qur'an 3:49, Arberry)

This story of Jesus creating birds comes from an early Christian fable⁵ about the childhood of Jesus, and it demonstrates Jesus' divinity by showing him as the creator, that is, the Qur'an contains a story about Jesus being God.

In the Qur'an the story now says that Jesus only did this by God's permission; however, this does not remove Jesus' divinity from the story, because creating is a unique attribute that defines God. If God shares this attribute with Jesus then Jesus shares in what is uniquely God's, and so shares in the identity of God. If, as Muslim leaders claim, God can share this attribute with anyone then God is no longer unique. Therefore, an element of incarnational theology still remains in the Qur'an.

⁵ *The Infancy Gospel of Thomas*

Conclusion

In this booklet we have taken steps towards understanding the doctrine of the incarnation and examined some of our assumptions along the way. We have considered how God relates to creation, accommodates himself to us, and has always planned to dwell with us. We have seen that humanity is created in the image of God. All of these doctrines have been shown to be the foundation for the incarnation. We have seen that the Gospel records and reveals that Jesus is fully God and fully man. We have also seen that Islam too has its own understanding of God's presence in creation and retains a story of Jesus' divinity. I hope this has helped you to understand the incarnation better.

Finally, I wish to commend the belief that Jesus is God to you because of the unity of scripture. As was outlined in chapter 2, the Bible is not one book but many books, from many prophets, in different languages, from different times, and different locations. Yet, in spite of this great diversity there is one message.

THE BIBLE			
Torah	Prophets	Psalms	Gospel
← ----- c. 1500 years ----- →			
Humanity is created in the image of God.			
The Fatherhood & Son of God			
God dwells with his people.			
The Priesthood & the Sacrifice for Sin			
One Story of Redemption			

In this booklet we have only considered the incarnation but we could have considered any Christian belief. As this table shows, the basic beliefs of Christianity are in fact the teachings of all the prophets. This unity of scripture testifies to the truthfulness and preservation of the Bible. If you say you believe the prophets then believe what the prophets have written and God has fulfilled.

The Next Step: Why not read the scripture about Jesus for yourself? Read a Gospel and see what God has done for us. Ask a Christian for a copy or search for it online. I recommend that you start with the book called *Matthew*.

