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# The Christ of Shia Islam

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## Introduction

THERE are reports that President Bush, meeting Iraqi dissidents before the invasion of Iraq, was surprised and mystified by the revelation that there were significant differences between the Sunni and Shia communities. Since then, the ongoing civil conflict between Sunnis and Shia in Iraq and the current nuclear crisis concerning Shi'ite Iran have made this bewilderment more general—and the need for a proper understanding more urgent. Even among Islamicists, Shi'ite Islam is arguably the Cinderella of academic investigation when compared to the massive attention paid to Sunni Islam. In one sense this is inevitable: over ninety per cent of Muslims worldwide are Sunnis, and whereas Sunni texts are freely available in translation, the same cannot be said for their Shi'ite equivalents. For Christians, the obvious point of reference is to examine what Shi'ism teaches about the Person and Work of Christ.

## 1. Jesus in the Qur'an

In the Qur'an Jesus is termed '*Isa bin Maryam*'—Jesus Son of Mary. There are different theories about the origins of the term '*Isa*'. One is that it derives from the Syriac *Yeshū*, and thus ultimately from the Hebrew/Aramaic name *Yeshua*.<sup>1</sup> The great Christian missionary and author Samuel Zwemer noted the hypothesis of Otto Pautz that '*Isa* derived from 'Esau', reflecting a derisory term by the Jews in Medina for Jesus.<sup>2</sup> Zwemer himself suggests that '*Isa* was constructed to rhyme with *Musa*, the Arabic for Moses, and this would be in keeping with the Qur'an's rhythmic character.<sup>3</sup> More important is the title 'Son of Mary'. In Arab culture, men are described in terms of their paternal rather than maternal origins, yet the latter is true of Jesus in Islam. There are three possibilities for its origin.

1 F.P. Cotterell, 'The Christology of Islam', in Harold H. Rowdon (ed.), *Christ the Lord: Studies in Christology presented to Donald Guthrie* (Leicester: IVP, 1982), p. 284.

2 Samuel Zwemer, *The Moslem Christ* (London: Oliphants, [1912?]. pp. 34-35.

3 Zwemer, *The Moslem Christ*, p. 33.

Firstly, it may reflect Islam's emphasis on the virgin birth of Jesus. Surah An-Anbiyaa 21:91 states: 'And (remember) her who guarded her chastity: We breathed into her of Our Spirit and We made her and her son a Sign for all peoples'. Similarly in Surah Al-i-Imran 3:45ff we encounter terms that resemble the Lukan Annunciation narrative:

(And remember) when the angels said: O Mary! Allah giveth thee glad tidings of a word from Him, whose name is the Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary...<sup>47</sup> She said: My Lord! How can I have a child when no mortal hath touched me? He said:... Allah createth what He will... He saith unto it only: Be! and it is.

It should be stressed that Islam attaches no theological significance to the Virgin Birth; in Surah 3:59 we are informed: '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.' Muslims will often point out that Adam's creation was a *greater* miracle, since he had no parents at all! Moreover, there does not seem to be any compelling reason for the virgin birth in the Qur'an, since Islam denies original sin; the miracle is merely an arbitrary act of God's will, an expression of his power.

The second possibility is that the term may have been encountered by Muslim refugees in Abyssinia. Cotterell has considered this hypothesis, but ultimately rejects it:

The suggestion that the title 'Son of Mary' originated in Abyssinia, and indicated a high view of Mary rather than a low view of Jesus,

fails at two points. Firstly, it is supposed that the title was brought back from Abyssinia by returning Muslim refugees, after the first hijra. However, the title occurs in Meccan Suras, decisively in Sura 19 which, according to tradition, was recited to the Abyssinian Nagash (Eth. *negūs*, 'king') by the refugees. Secondly there is no evidence that the title 'Son of Mary' was used by the Abyssinian church: it does not appear in the Ethiopic Qiddase. In any event the use of the title by the Abyssinian church is highly unlikely since its strong monophysite position ensured that the deity of Christ all but eclipsed his humanity.<sup>4</sup>

The third possibility is that it was borrowed from the Arabic Gospel of the Infancy where the term (though not the *title*) 'Son of Mary' is employed on several occasions. The apocryphal gospel addresses the mother of Jesus as 'Lady Mary', so it may be the case that the term was taken from this source. The birth of Jesus is accompanied by Mary's retirement to a remote place under a palm-tree, Surah Maryam 19:23, as opposed to a detailed journey to Bethlehem; the only topographical reference is to Mary 'when she withdrew from her family to a place in the East', v16, but no specific geography is presented.

In the Qur'an Jesus is described as a *nabi*—Prophet (Surah Maryam 19:30: He said: "I am indeed a servant of Allah: He hath given me revelation and made me a prophet...") and a *rasul*—

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4 Cotterell, 'The Christology of Islam', p. 285.

Apostle/Messenger (Surah Nisaa 4:171: O people of the Book!...Christ Jesus the son of Mary was (no more than) an Apostle...), the essential distinction being that the latter is given a book and establishes a new dispensation.<sup>5</sup> This often causes confusion for Christians in discussions with Muslims. If the former address the latter and refer to 'the Gospel of Christ', the latter often think in terms of their own beliefs—that Jesus was given a book (the Injil—'Gospel') by Allah, rather than what Christians mean, either the message of Jesus or the writings of the Four Evangelists.

The reference in 3:35 to Jesus being 'a word from Allah' should not be confused with the biblical concept of the Logos. Rather, it refers to Jesus being created by a divine *fiat* rather than paternal human generation—Surah 16:40: '...We but say the word, 'Be', and it is'. Linked to this, and frequently confusing for Christians, is that Jesus is termed *Ruh'Allah* —'spirit of God'. Again, this means no more than the fact that his spirit was directly given by God through the virginal conception. It should be noted that the title 'Holy Spirit' usually refers to the Angel Gabriel, with whom Jesus was 'strengthened', Surah Baqarah 2:87.

Another description, used also in a titular sense, is *Al-Masih*—the *Messiah*, as in Surah Al-i-Imran 3:45. However, it should be noted that the Qur'an never explains the meaning of the term—there are no references to Jesus reigning. It is usually held on the basis of Surah An-Nisa 4:157:

...they said (in boast) 'We killed Christ Jesus the son of Mary the Apostle of Allah'; but they killed him not nor crucified him but so it was made to appear to them...158. Nay Allah raised him up unto Himself...

Muslims have different theories as to what occurred on Calvary. Usually, it is believed that a passing Jew, one of the Roman soldiers, Judas, Simon of Cyrene or even one of the disciples, usually Peter, had his features transformed by God. Others interpret 4:157 by viewing the text as rejecting the claim that the *Jews* killed Christ. Rather, *Allah* was responsible, and it only *appeared* to the Jews that they had got their way. For example, referring to Muslims who killed their foes at the battle of Badr, Surah 8:17 states 'Ye (Muslims) slew them not, but Allah slew them'.

The biblical infancy narratives are not reproduced in the Qur'an; instead we are introduced to the *wunderkind* of apocryphal gospels, with Jesus speaking in the cradle, Surah Maryam 19:19ff, as we find in the apocryphal *Gospel of the Infancy* '1... Jesus spoke... lying in His cradle...' Surah Maida 5:110 presents Jesus performing the miracle of animating clay birds: '...thou makest out of clay as it were the figure of a bird...and thou breathest into it and it becometh a bird...' Again in *Infancy* 36 we read that the seven year-old Jesus: '... made figures of birds and sparrows, which flew when He told them to fly...' Similar ideas are found in the *Gospel of Thomas the Israelite*.

5 Zwemer, *The Moslem Christ*, pp. 30-31.

## 2. Jesus in the Shi'ite Hadith

The Sunni-Shia dispute largely arose over the succession to Muhammad. Sunnis believe that Muhammad's father-in-law, Abu Bakr, was the rightful leader as he was elected by the Muslim community. In contrast, the Shia believe that Muhammad, under divine guidance, had chosen Ali to succeed him—thus over-ruling any 'democratic' choice by the community (God plus one—or even God alone—being a majority). Thereafter, the Shia believed that legitimate rule rested with the progeny of Ali.

The majority Shia denomination is the Twelvers, so-termed because they believe in Twelve 'Imams', as their hereditary *Amirs* are termed, commencing with Ali and culminating with a four year old boy, Abul-Qasim, who disappeared into a cave at Samarra, near Baghdad, in 873, the 'Lesser Occultation'. This was followed by the 'Greater Occultation', when government by his four deputies came to an end in 939, and a problem emerged of legitimate government; the 'Guardianship of the Jurist' theory (*Vilayet i-Faqih*) proposed by Ayatollah Khomeini is an attempt to resolve this question. As the 'Hidden Imam', however, Abul-Qasim continues to exercise an inner spiritual influence, watching over his followers and influencing their relationship with God. The Shia eagerly await his return from occultation.

Imams are considered as infallible, and since the Amirate was assumed by someone other than the man designated by the Prophet, the implication is that the first three Caliphs Abu Bakr, Umar and 'Uthman were guilty of apos-

tasy. In consequence, the Shia traditionally engaged in liturgical cursing of the first three caliphs (until Khomeini banned this), and are especially antagonistic towards Aisha. Shia greatly venerate Ali and his sons Hasan and Hussain.

There are other differences also. Apart from ritual distinctions, Shi'ites also practise *mut'ah*—temporary marriage. A contract is signed between the parties effecting 'marriage' for anything between one hour and ninety-nine years. Any child born of this relationship is recognized as the legal offspring of the father, but does not enjoy the same rights as the child of a full marriage. As a result of their persecution by Sunni elements, they sometimes engage in *taqiya*—dissimulation/concealment, and *ketman*, where they pretend to be something other than Shi'ites.

In regard to the Qur'an, the Shia, because they hold that the *active* attributes of God, such as speaking, are not eternal, believe that the Qur'an, as the 'speech' of God, is created.<sup>6</sup> To Shia, the Sunni view which holds that the Qur'an is eternal and *uncreated*, borders on polytheism.<sup>7</sup> Sunni and Shi'ite polemicists accuse each other of corrupting the *Qur'an*. Sunnis assert that the Shia believe that there is a Surah 'missing' from the Qur'an about Ali, *Surah Wilaya*, that the Shi'ites are supposed to allege was excised from the

6 S. Husain M. Jafri, *Origins and Early Development of Shi'a Islam* (London and New York: Longman, 1979), pp. 311-312.

7 Moojan Momen, *An Introduction to Shi'i Islam* (New Haven and London: Yale Univ. Press, 1985.), p. 176.

Muslim holy book.<sup>8</sup> Another claim is that Shi'ites supposedly hold that another chapter Surah Nurain (forty-one verses), the 'Chapter of the Two Lights' (i.e. Muhammad and Ali) was deleted. Jafri comments:

...the text of the Qur'an as it is to be found in the textus receptus... is accepted wholly by the Shi'is, just as it is by the Sunnis. Thus the assertion that the Shi'is believe that a part of the Qur'an is not included in the textus receptus is erroneous.<sup>9</sup>

Nonetheless, whilst Shi'ites uphold that nothing has been *added*, some have asserted that references to Ali have been excised.<sup>10</sup> It should also be noted that the Qur'an holds that some of its verses are explicit whilst others are allegorical.<sup>11</sup> Shi'ites believe that the latter have a deeper, mystical meaning known only to the Imams and thus revealed in their narrations. Shi'ites also believe that the Qur'an is not in the original chronological order (a fact acknowledged by Sunnis),

which the following narration observes:

I heard Abu Jafar (AS) saying: 'No one (among ordinary people) claimed that he gathered the Quran completely in the order that was revealed by Allah except a liar; (since) no one has gathered it and memorised it completely in the order that was revealed by Allah, except Ali ibn Abi Talib (AS) and the Imams after him (AS)' (*Usul al-Kafi* 607).

Apart from the Qur'an, Muslims also follow the Hadith—the traditions of Muhammad—his words, deeds and silences. The problem is that Sunnis and Shia have distinct, sometimes competing *Hadith* collections. The most important Shia collections are the two collations of Mohammad Ibne Yaqoob Abu Jafar Kulaini (d. 939), *Usool al Kafi* and *Forroh al Kafi*. Others include *Man la yahduruhu al-Faqih*, by Muhammad ibn Babuya (d. 991); *Tahdhib al-Akhkam*, by Sheikh Muhammad at-Tusi, Shaykhu't-Ta'ifa (d.1067); *Al-Istibsar*, by the same author. To get the distinctive Shia position on Jesus, we must examine the Shia Hadith.

## The Birth of Jesus

We have noted the absence of any clear reference to Bethlehem in the Qur'anic narrative, although it is said Mary went to a place in 'the east'. The Shi'ite Hadith goes further: it identifies where this place was:

...And do you know what was the river beside which Mary gave birth to Jesus ('a)?... It was the Euphrates, and beside it were date palms and grape vines. There is

8 O believers, believe in the Prophet and in the guardian (Wali), whom We sent to guide you to the straight path...7. Glorify the praises of your Lord and 'Ali is among the witnesses. Al-Afghaane, Dr Ahmad, *The Mirage in Iran*, (Saudi Arabia: Abul-Qasim Publishing House, 1985, trans. Abu Ameenah Bilal Philips), pp. 17-18.

9 Jafri, *Origins and Early Development of Shi'a Islam*, p. 312.

10 Momen, *An Introduction to Shi'i Islam*, pp. 172-173.

11 Surah Al-i-Imran 3:7: 'He it is Who has sent down to thee the Book: in it are verses basic or fundamental (of established meaning)... others are allegorical...'

nothing like the grapes and date palms near the Euphrates... (*Kāfi*, 1, 478, 4)

The significance of this is that the Euphrates is by Kerbala, the Shi'ite holy city in Iraq, near where Hussein, the grandson of Muhammad was martyred. We therefore can infer an aspect of typological salvation history in this tradition. Significantly, there is nothing comparable to these narrations in the Sunni Hadith. Indeed, the treatment of Jesus in the Shia Hadith is much more fulsome than its Sunni equivalent (which is not to say that the presentation of Jesus in the Sunni Hadith is insignificant), and there are far more points of contact between Shi'ism and the Gospel presentation than the latter has with Sunni traditions (and indeed, with the relatively sparse picture of Christ in the Qur'an). Perhaps this is because Shi'ism has so much emphasis on the mediatorial role of the Twelve Imams, whom Shia believe were created from the Light of God.

There is also a strong stress on the martyrdom of Hussein by Yazid and Muawiya, whom Shia hold to be evil usurpers. Every year at the Ashura festival Shia identify with this martyrdom and express their repentance for not coming to Hussein's aid by slashing and beating themselves. Arguably, this suggests that in some form the martyrdom of Hussein was redemptive, and that Shia seek to identify with this redeeming act. Another narration links Kerbala to Jesus and thus to *Al-Qa'im*, the Twelfth Imam, whom Shia hold to be the Mahdi:

Mufaddal reported in a lengthy narration from al-Sàdiq ('a), 'Then Abu

'Abd Allah ('a) took a breath and said, 'O Mufaddal! The places on the earth boasted among themselves... Allah revealed, "... It [Karbala] is a blessed place from which Moses was called from a bush, it is a hill where Mary and Christ found refuge, at which there is a river where the head of Husayn was washed and where Mary washed Jesus ('a), and where Mary washed herself after giving birth to Jesus. It is the best place from which the Apostle of Allah ('s) ascended when he was absent, and for our *Shi'ah* there are blessings until the appearance of the *Qa'im* ('a).'" (*Bihār al-anwar*, 53, 1-11)

The birth of Jesus is also held to have had a remarkable consequence in terms of spiritual warfare on Iblis, the Devil, with events resembling the fall of Dagon before the Ark of the Covenant and the purported collapse of the idols in the Ka'aba before Muhammad after the conquest of Mecca:

Iblis came that night and it was said to him that a child had been born that night, and that there was no idol on the earth that did not fall on its face. Iblis went to the East and West in search of him. Then he found him in a room of a convent. The angels surrounded him. He tried to get close to him. The angels shouted, 'Get away!' He said to them, 'Who is his father?' They said, 'His case is like that of Adam.'... (*Bihār al-anwar*, 14, 215, 14)

It is reported that Abu 'Abd Allah al-Sàdiq ('a) said, 'The devil, may Allah curse him, used to pass through the seven heavens. When

Jesus was born, he was barred from three heavens....' (*Bihâr al-anwar*, 15, 257, 9)

### The Ministry of Jesus

According to the Shi'ite Hadith, Jesus actually started his prophetic ministry at age two (or three in some narrations):

It is reported that [Imam] Ridâ ('a) said, 'Verily Allah, the Exalted, authorised Jesus ('a) when he was two years old.' (*Bihâr al-anwar*, 14, 257, 54)

Whereas the Qur'an makes no mention of the number of the apostles, Shi'ism does indeed identify their number, and also presents a Jesus who has an ethically/geographically restricted ministry, since Islam holds that only Muhammad was chosen to be the Messenger to the whole world:

It is reported that [Imam] Bâqir ('a) said, 'Allah sent Jesus especially to the children of Israel, and his prophecy was in Jerusalem, and after him there were twelve apostles.' (*Bihar al-anwar*, 14, 250)

Despite this idea, the Shia narrations refer to an incident very familiar to Christians—the supplication of a Canaanite woman to Jesus for a miracle on behalf of her child, only in this case it is in aid of an invalid son, rather than a demonised daughter as in Matthew 15:22ff:

It is reported that a woman from Canaan brought her invalid son to Jesus, Peace be upon him. She said: 'O Prophet of God! This my son is an invalid. Pray to God for him.' He said: 'That which I have been com-

manded is only the healing of the invalids of the Children of Israel.' She said: 'O Spirit of God! Verily the dogs receive the remnants from the tables of their masters after the meal, so, avail us of that which may benefit us of your wisdom.' Then he supplicated God, the Supreme, asking for permission. Then He gave His permission, and he made him well. (*Bihar al-anwar* xiv, 253)

One interesting point of contact between Shi'ism and the Bible is that unlike the Qur'an, where mention is absent, we are presented with Jesus being tempted by Satan, and one tradition in particular resembles the Temptation in the Desert:

It is reported that Imam Sadiq ('a) said: 'Iblis came to Jesus ('a), then he said: "Do you not claim that you can revive the dead?" Jesus said: "Yes." Iblis said: "Then throw yourself down from the top of the wall." Then Jesus said: "Woe unto you! Verily the servant does not try his Lord."... (*Bihar al-anwar*, xiv, 271)

Another tradition bears some resemblance, though in a rather altered fashion, to the conversation of Jesus with the Samaritan woman:

It has been reported that Abu 'Abd Allah [Imam Sadiq], Peace be upon him, said: 'The world took the form, for Jesus ('a), of a woman whose eyes were blue. Then he said to her: "How many have you married?" She said: "Very many." He said: "Then did they all divorce you?" She said: "No, but I killed all of them." He said: "Then woe be to the rest of your husbands! How they fail to learn from the example of the past ones!"' (*Bihar al-anwar*,

xiv, 330, 66)

There are also more hadiths which bear more than an echo of comments or actions from the Gospels, such as the following, where Jesus washes the feet of his disciples on one occasion and in another narration promises that as Allah will provide for them, they need not be anxious for their lives:

Jesus the son of Mary ('a) said: 'O assembly of Apostles! I have a request of you. Fulfill it for me.' They said: 'Your request is fulfilled, O Spirit of Allah!' Then he stood up and washed their feet. They said: 'It would have been more proper for us to have done this, O Spirit of Allah!' Then he said: 'Verily, it is more fitting for one with knowledge to serve the people. Indeed, I humbled myself only so that you may humble yourselves among the people after me, even as I have humbled myself among you.' Then Jesus ('a) said: 'Wisdom is developed by humility, not by pride, and likewise plants only grow in soft soil, not in rocks.' (*Bihar al-anwar*, ii, 62; *Al-Kafi*, vi, 37)

Al-Sayyid ibn Tawus, may Allah have mercy on him, said: I read in the Gospel that Jesus ('a) said: 'I tell you, do not worry about what you will eat or what you will drink or with what you will clothe your bodies. Is not the soul more excellent than food, and the body more excellent than clothes? Look at the birds of the air, they neither sow nor reap nor store away, yet your heavenly Lord provides for them. Are you not more excellent than they'? Who among you by worrying can add a single measure to his

stature'? Then why do you worry about your clothes?' (*Bihar al-anwar*, xiv, 317)

Another Shi'ite tradition seems to reflect the longer ending of the Gospel of John 7:53-8:11 about the woman taken in adultery:

Imam al-Sadiq, Peace be upon him, said: 'Verily, a man came to Jesus the son of Mary, Peace be upon him, and said to him: "O Spirit of Allah! I have committed fornication so purify me." Then Jesus ordered the people to be called so that none should be left behind for the purification of so-and-so. Then when the people had been gathered together and the man had entered into a hole, so as to be stoned, the man in the hole called out:

"Anyone for whom Allah, the Supreme, has a punishment should not punish me." Then all the people left except for John and Jesus, Peace be upon them. Then John, Peace be upon him, approached him and said to him: "O sinner! Advise me!" Then he said to him: "Do not leave your self alone with its desires or you will perish." John, Peace be upon him, said: "Say more." He said: "Verily, do not humiliate the wrongdoer for his fault." John, Peace be upon him, said: "Say more. He said: 'Do not become angry.' John, Peace be upon him, said: "That is enough for me." (*Bihar al-anwar*, xiv, 188)

The interesting point about this text is that it presents a different picture from the biblical narrative about the ministry relationship of the two prophets. Whereas in the New Testament the only points of contact

between the two are at the Baptism and when John contacts Jesus from prison, according to Shi'ism they seem to be in a team ministry. Intriguingly, a Shi'ite hadith relates that Jesus resurrected John, but the latter preferred to return to Paradise:

It is reported that Abu 'Abd Allah [Imam Sadiq], Peace be upon him, said: 'Verily, Jesus the son of Mary, Peace be upon him, came to the tomb of John the son of Zachariah, Peace be upon him, and he asked his Lord to revive him. Then he called him, and he answered him and he came out from the grave and said to him: "What do you want from me?" And he said to him: "I want you to be friends with me as you were in this world." Then he said to him: "O Jesus! The heat of death has not yet subsided, and you want me to return to the world and the heat of death would return to me. So he Jesus left him, and he returned to his grave."' (*Kafi* iii, 260)

As we continue down the list, we discover more traditions that clearly reflect biblical tradition, amongst them the following ethical injunctions. The first reflects Matthew 5:39 and which seems at variance with the Qur'anic command 'Fight in the cause of God those who fight you' (Surah 2:190). The second obviously echoes Matthew 5:27-28, whilst the third mirrors Matthew 7:15-17:

It is reported that Imam Sadiq, Peace be upon him, said: 'Jesus the son of Mary, Peace be upon them, said to some of his companions: "Do not do to others what you do not like others to do to you, and if

someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him your left cheek too."' (*Bihar al-anwar*, x, 287)

Jesus ('a) said: 'You heard what was said to the people of yore, "Do not commit adultery," but I tell you, he who looks at a woman and desires her has committed adultery in his heart. If your right eye betrays you, then take it out and cast it away, for it is better for you that you destroy one of your organs than cast your entire body into the fire of hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and cast it away, for it is better for you to destroy one of your organs than that your entire body should go to hell.' (*Bihar al-anwar*, xiv, 317)

It is reported from the Gospel: 'Beware of liars who come to you in sheep's clothing while in reality they are ravenous wolves. You shall know them by their fruits. It is not possible for a good tree to bear vicious fruit, nor for a vicious tree to bear good fruit.' (*Uddat al-da'i*, 152).

A further ethical difference between Christianity and Islam is over polygamy. It is well-known that Islam permits the marrying of up to four wives, whereas Christianity is strictly monogamous, largely based on the fact that God created one wife for Adam, not a harem; that Jesus implied support for monogamy in Matthew 19: 4-6; and that Paul emphasized monogamous marriage as a condition for eldership, e.g. 1 Timothy 3:2. The Shia Hadith answers the objection that Muhammad permitted what Jesus forbade by observing that Islam, which often

describes itself as 'The Middle Path', gave a middle way between the unlimited polygamy of the Old Testament era and the strict monogamy of Jesus by allowing limited polygyny:

It is reported in true narrations that getting married without limit [to the number of wives] was permitted in the revealed law of Moses for the sake of men's affairs; and in the revealed law of Jesus only one was permitted for the sake of women's affairs. So this revealed law [of Islam] came for the sake of both. (*Awàlī al-La'ālī*, 1, 446)

We also find parallels in terms of Jesus instruction as to importunate prayer, and also in terms of some miracles. As we saw in the Qur'an, some miracles of Jesus therein reflect those in apocryphal traditions, and these are indeed reproduced in the Shia Hadith, but we also find some which mirror those in the Bible:

Al-Sayyid ibn Tawus, may God have mercy on him, said: 'I read in the Gospel that Jesus ('a) said: "Who among you gives his son a stone when he asks for bread? Or who hands out a snake when asked for a cloak? If despite the fact that your evil is well-known you give good gifts to your sons, then it is more fitting that your Lord should give good things to one who asks."' (*Bihar al-anwar*, xiv, 318; Sa'd al-su'ud, 56)

Al-Sayyid ibn Tawus, may God have mercy on him, said: 'I read in the Gospel that Jesus ('a) boarded a ship and his disciples were with him, when suddenly there was a great confusion in the sea, so that

the ship came near to being covered by the waves. And it was as though [Jesus ('a)] was asleep. Then his disciples came to him and awakened him and said: "O master! Save us so that we do not perish." He said to them: "O you of little faith! What has frightened you?" Then he stood up and drove away the winds, and there was a great stillness. The people marveled, and said: "How is this? Verily the winds and the sea obey him."' (*Bihar al-anwar* xiv, 266)

The Prophet ('s) said, 'Verily, Allah sent down a spread to Jesus ('a) and blessed him with a flat loaf of bread and fishes, so four thousand seven hundred people ate of it and were sated.' (*Bihar al-anwar*, 14, 249, 37).

There are several texts in the Qur'an—2:65; 5:60; 7:166 which refer to disobedient Jews who broke the law of God being punished by him through being transformed into apes and pigs—Surah Baqarah 2:65: And you know well the story of those among you who broke Sabbath. We said to them: 'Be apes—despised and hated by all.' The Shi'ite Hadith links this with Jesus and the story of the Gadarene swine:

Mughayrah narrated from Abu 'Abd Allah, and he from his father, and he from his grandfather, peace be with them, that he said, 'The transformed among the children of Adam are thirteen kinds: monkey, swine and... As for the monkeys, they were a group that came down to a town near the beach of the sea, acted unlawfully on Saturday and fished. So Allah, the Exalted, transformed them into monkeys. As for

the swine, they were a group among the children of Israel that Jesus the son of Mary ('a) cursed. So Allah, the Exalted, transformed them into swine.' (*ʿIlal al-Sharà'i'*, 2, 487)

## The Ascension and Return of Jesus

As we have seen, there are different Sunni theories on the Crucifixion, but it is clear that the Shi'ite Hadith, unlike its Sunni equivalent, explicitly denies that Jesus was crucified:

It is reported that Abu 'Abd Allah ('a) said, '... as for the occultation of Jesus, the Jews and the Christians are agreed that he was killed, so Allah, the Mighty and Magnificent, belied them by His saying, They did not kill nor crucify him, but it appeared to them so (4:157). Likewise, the occultation of al-Qà'im ('a), then the community will deny it.' (*Bihar al-anwar*, 51, 220, 9)

We saw that Muslims usually hold that Judas was miraculously transformed to look like Jesus and was crucified in his stead, which probably reflects the ideas of the Gnostic Basilideans about Simon of Cyrene being so-transmogrified. Whilst this notion is absent from the Sunni Hadith, it is present in the Shia narrations:

It is related in the *tafsir* attributed to Imam Hasan 'Askari that regarding the verse, **and We strengthened him with the holy spirit** (2:87) he said, 'He is Gabriel, and this was when Allah raised him through a hole in his house to heav-

en, and He cast his likeness on the one who had desired to kill him, so he was killed instead of him.' (*Bihar al-anwar*, 14, 338, 10)

It has previously been noted that the Shia traditions like to link Jesus to Hussein, but this is also true in terms of the son-in-law of Muhammad, Ali, who was assassinated. They do so by claiming that their deaths occurred on the same day several centuries apart:

It is reported that Habīb ibn 'Amr said, 'When the Commander of the Faithful passed away, Hasan stood and spoke. He said, "O you people! On this night Jesus the son of Mary was raised."' (*Bihar al-anwar*, 14, 335, 1)

Jesus is further linked with towering Shia figures by his parallel with the Mahdi, the Twelfth Imam. Muslims of all descriptions believe in the coming of the Mahdi as a point of faith, and Sunni traditions definitely describe him as a descendant of Muhammad, without explicitly identifying him. In contrast, Shi'ites clearly identify him with the Twelfth Imam. Like Jesus, he plays an important eschatological role towards the end of the world. The Shia concept provides a greater parallel in that like Jesus he is now in 'occultation', and Shi'ites anxiously await his return to fill the world with justice and equity. The first parallel is with the number and identity of angels who accompany the two figures:

Abu 'Abdullah ('a) said, 'It is as if I were looking at al-Qà'im ('a) outside of Najaf mounted on a horse... When he raises the flag of the Apostle of Allah ('s) thirteen thousand and thirteen angels come down to him each of whom looks to

him, and they are those who were with Noah on the ark, and they were with Abraham when he was cast into the fire, and they were with Jesus at his ascension....' (*Bihâr*, 19, 305, 47)

In temporal terms, the coming of the Mahdi and Jesus is linked, with the Mahdi returning first, then Jesus descending to aid him. After Jesus' triumphantly vanquishes the enemies of Islam, he will show admirable humility by declining to lead the *Salat* (communal Muslim prayers) in deference to the Twelfth Imam:

The Apostle of Allah said, 'How can a community perish when I am at the beginning of it, Jesus the son of Mary will be at the end of it and al-Mahdî will be in the middle of it.' (*Dalâ'il al-Imâmah*, 234)

It is reported that the Prophet ('s) said, 'Among my progeny is the Mahdi. When he emerges, Jesus the son of Mary will descend to help him, then Jesus will send him ahead and pray behind him.' (*Bihâr al-anwar*, 14, 349)

In the New Testament, we read of the 'Man of Lawlessness', often identified as the Antichrist, being slain at the Parousia of Christ 'with the breath of his mouth and bring to an end by the appearance of his coming'. The Shia Hadith has a more literal understanding of this prediction, and a similar tradition also reveals him as a pious Muslim who brings and end to all religions save Islam:

It is reported that Abu 'Abd Allah ('a) said, 'Jesus the son of Mary is the Spirit of Allah and His Word. He was thirty-three years old in the

world. Then Allah raised him to heaven. He will descend to the earth and it is he who will kill the Antichrist (Dajjâl).' (*Tafsîr al-Qumî*, 2, 271)

It is reported from Abu 'Abd Allah from his fathers that Hasan the son of 'Alî ('a) said when disputing with the king of Byzantium, 'The life of Jesus in the world was thirty-three years. Then Allah raised him to heaven and he will descend to the earth in Damascus, and it is he who will kill the Antichrist (Dajjâl).' (*Bihâr al-anwar*, 14, 247, 27)

It is reported that, 'Jesus ('a) will descend, wearing two saffron colored robes.' According to another tradition, 'Jesus the son of Mary will descend to a hill of the Sacred Earth that is named Ithbanî [or Ithbayt]. Two yellow dresses are on him and the hair of his head is anointed and there is a lance (arm) in his hand by which he kills Dajjâl. He comes to Jerusalem while the people pray the afternoon prayer and Imâm is in front of them. Imâm comes back, but Jesus prefers him and prays behind him according to the revealed law of Muhammad. Then he will kill the swine, break the crosses, destroy the churches and temples and kill the Christians unless they believe in him.' (*Umdah*, 430)

## Conclusion

Our venture through the Shi'ite Hadith has revealed an often surprising series of echoes from the Gospels. Of course, there remain serious differences, but it

may well be the case that the many parallels between the two religious traditions offers an opportunity for fruitful dialogue between Evangelical Christians and Shia Muslims, since as far as the Hadith goes there is much more in common with Shi'ites than there is with Sunnis. The same problems we often experience in trying to explain what we believe about Jesus, based on our understanding of the Gospel narratives, in regard to Sunnis are less to the fore when we consider relations and dialogue with the Shia. Hopefully this display of Shi'ite narrations may well aid and advance such an encounter. After all, both Shi'ites and Christians eagerly await the Second Coming of Christ.

It follows that apart from the academic dialogue, Evangelical Christians at 'ground level' interested in encountering their Shia Muslim neighbours can employ many Hadiths to explain what Christians believe more fully. In Britain some Evangelicals have been

holding 'Meetings for Better Understanding' with their Muslim neighbours, which are neither debates nor 'inter-faith' ecumenism, but meetings where each group presents what their faith community believes about a certain subject. We have seen that problems arise when we use the same phrase as Muslims but mean something different-as with the term 'the Holy Spirit'. Moreover, in the Qur'an, the narratives about Jesus sometimes have more in common with apocryphal pseudo-gospels than with the New Testament. However, since a number of Shia Hadith parallel to one degree or another narratives in the canonical gospels, the prospects for understanding are somewhat greater between Christians and Shi'ites, so perhaps in such meetings Evangelicals could employ certain Shia narrations to illustrate their points. After all, for Shia aware of such traditions, the Gospel narratives will not seem all that strange.

## **Christology in Dialogue with Muslims**

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