

Muslim Jes



AND STORIES IN ISLAMIC LITERATURE

Edited and Translated by

Tarif Khalidi

The Fifth Gospel: Tarif Khalidi on Jesus in the “Muslim Gospel”

Interview and commentary
by Salim Tamari

*Muslim Jesus** by Tarif Khalidi, Professor of Islamic history at Cambridge University, was widely greeted upon its publication in 2001 as a pioneering work in the reconstruction of how the Christian Messiah was seen and interpreted by Islamic scholars across the ages, and as a major contribution to inter-faith and inter-cultural dialogue. Harvey Cox, a leading Protestant theologian, hailed it as "an invaluable... resource [which] will enrich the present lively dialogue between the two fraternal faiths."

The book contains a penetrating essay on how the figure of Jesus served - together with several biblical prophets - as a moral

* *The Muslim Jesus: Sayings and Stories in Islamic Literature*, edited and translated by Tarif al-Khalidi, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 2001. \$22.95. 245 pages.

model for Islamic conduct and as a patron saint of Islamic asceticism. The Muslim Jesus was also an instrument of doctrinal disputations within various Islamic schools of thought. Jesus, Khalidi claims, "was no mere or distant model of ethics but a figure who seems at times to lend his support to certain factions and against others in internal Muslim polemics and takes sides on such stormy issues as the role of scholars in society and their attitude to government, the dispute over free will versus predestination (*qadar*), the question of faith and sin, and the status of the sinful believer or ruler. These were deeply divisive conflicts, many of them being important triggers of the civil wars that wracked the first and half of Islamic history".

The Muslim Jesus in Khalidi's work comes across as a rebel against society, a loner, and an ascetic opposed to marriage and domesticity, with (to use modern terms) distinct anti-clerical views.



In the interview below with Salim Tamari of the *JQF*, Tarif Khalidi elaborates on the themes of *The Muslim Jesus*.

ST: *You make an important distinction between the Qur'anic Jesus (in which the early Islamic tradition dissociated the figure of Christ from the Trinitarian dogma and from the story of the Crucifixion) and the Muslim Gospel (Islamic literary traditions that portray Jesus and attribute sayings to him) in which Jesus comes through as a 'patron saint of Muslim asceticism'. Are you suggesting that these traditions are more in line with the Jesus of the Gospel than the Jesus we find in the Qur'an?*

TK: In one important sense, yes. The Jesus of the Qur'an is essentially a theological argument and not a narrative. He is unlike any other Qur'anic prophet in this respect. There is no Incarnation, no Passion, no Crucifixion and hardly any Ministry. In the *Hadith* (or Traditions) of Muhammad, we have a distant figure of the eschaton, a Christ who will come at the end of days to judge mankind and prepare the world for its end. In neither source do we encounter a narrative or anything that might be said to resemble a New Testament Gospel.

Enter the Islamic literary tradition. It was this which provided what one might call a "gospel", i.e. sayings and stories attributed to Jesus which across a millennium accumulated inside that tradition. The Muslim scholars who created this "gospel" were, I think, very conscious of particular images of Jesus that they needed to preserve for ethical purposes particularly relevant to their own tradition. Did they have the four Gospels in mind while they carried out their task? I think largely yes. Some sayings, for example, reveal an intimate knowledge of the speaking style of the Jesus of the four Gospels. And all the sayings and stories were clearly designed to be worth of a figure who was after all, not just "a word" of God and "a spirit" from Him, as per the Qur'an, but now has become "The Word" and "The Spirit" of God. A Christian would therefore find these sayings and stories in their totality far closer in spirit to the New Testament Gospels.

ST: *You suggest that, of all the Old and New Testament prophets found in the Qu'ran and Islamic tradition, the Muslim Jesus is the most controversial precisely because these collective traditions deny*

basic Christian doctrines on the Trinity and Crucifixion. Yet your book was well received among contemporary Christian theologians as an act of reconciliation. How do you explain that?

TK: As to your question regarding reception among Christians, the answer would be that while the Qur'an takes away certain essential Christian theological attributes of Jesus, it offers a number of alternative images of him. He is a miracle of God, an *Aya*. He is the prophet of peace. He is, as stated above, a word and a spirit of God. And he is given the special privilege of announcing the coming of Muhammad, so he is the harbinger of Islam. Now if one adds to this the other images that he projects in the Islamic literary tradition - the ascetic, the prophet of the heart, the gentle teacher of manners, the mystic, the lord of nature, the healer of spiritual ills - one arrives at a description of him, which in a sense complements that of the Four Gospels. A Christian for whom Jesus is a significant moral or spiritual model would therefore be expected to be interested in how another religious tradition received and cherished him.

ST: You claim that the Islamic Jesus of the Muslim Gospel maybe a fabrication and we may even come to discover who fabricated him and why. You also suggest that Kufa was the birthplace of the Muslim Gospel of Jesus Christ and, as such, produced what might be called a Shiite image of Jesus, which coloured much of the later perception of Jesus in Islam. Would you explain this?

TK: I use the term "fabrication" with some caution. I think what happened was this. As Islamic culture began to develop - and the city of Kufa was one very important

early centre of that culture - Muslim scholars began to put together a corpus of writings that would be relevant to their emergent concepts of ethics and of the good life. Jesus was an important source for this emerging system of virtue. Among many other reasons for the Islamic interest in him was the fact that his life represented the struggle between the letter of the law and the spirit of the law. This tension is endemic in all religions and the life of Jesus was found to be a vivid illustration of that tension. Did Muslim scholars actually sit down and decide to fabricate Jesus sayings? I think not. What probably happened was that, out of the vast stock of Near Eastern wisdom literature available to them, Muslim scholars tended to ascribe to Jesus those words or sayings that in their view best illustrated his significance. And they did so according to a pattern that they must have held of his teachings.

ST: Are there any implications for your work on the Muslim Jesus on modern Christian-Muslim and Muslim-Jewish dialogue against the current rise of Christian, Jewish, and Islamist fundamentalist movements today?

TK: One religion will often act as a hinterland of another. I suppose one might say that all religions should be examined ecumenically. The case of Jesus and Islam is a very salient example. Here is the central spiritual figure of one religion taken over and adopted by another to complement its own witness. This phenomenon would seem to me to be an important part of any agenda of modern Christian-Muslim dialogue.

The following are sayings attributed to Jesus, selected from *The Muslim Jesus*, with further explanation from Tarif Khalidi:

Jesus's Hostility to Marriage and Domesticity

Jesus Said: "I toppled the world upon its face and sat upon its back. I have no child that might die, no house that might fall into ruin". They said to him, "Will you not take a house for yourself?" He replied, "Build me a house in the path of the flood." They said, "Such will not last". They also asked Jesus, "Will you not take a wife?" He replied, "What do I do with a wife that might die?" [Source: Ahmad ibn Hanbal]

TK: The anti-marriage sentiment, though incongruent with early Islamic ethics, is nevertheless not uncommon in certain Sufi writers-e.g., in Abu Talib al Makki.



Jesus versus St John the Baptist

John the son of Zachariah met Jesus the son of Mary, John smiling of face and welcoming while Jesus was frowning and gloomy. Jesus said to John, "You smile as if you feel secure." John said to Jesus, "You frown as if you are in despair." God revealed, "What John does is dearer to Us." [Source: Abu Bakr ibn Abi al-dunya, Kitab al-Ikhwan]

TK: This encounter between Jesus and John is perhaps meant as a veiled criticism of excessive asceticism which borders on despair. To a Muslim audience, the saying would be interpreted as a reminder of God's infinite mercy. The words of God at the end imply that in some respects Jesus is less meritorious than John.



Satan and the Muslim Shehadah

It is related that Satan once appeared before Jesus and said to him, "Say: 'There is no god but God'." Jesus replied, "Righteous words which I will not speak after you." This is because Satan's deceptions can lurk even beneath good. [Source: Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din]

TK: The temptation of Jesus in the wilderness in Matthew 4:1-11 may be the inspiration for this episode. Note that Satan wants Jesus to repeat the Muslim confession of faith. The last sentence is a gloss, probably by Ghazzali himself.



The Slingshot

The day that Jesus was raised to heaven, he left behind nothing but a woolen garment, a slingshot, and two sandals. [Source: Hannad ibn al-Sariyy, Kitab al-Zuhd]

TK: Hannad was an important and early collector of ascetic traditions. This description of what Jesus left behind may echo Mark 6:7-9. This is an early account of the personal appearance and possessions of Jesus. The *midra'a* was a woolen garment much favored by ascetics and Sufis.