

ISLAM AND THE CROSS OF CHRIST

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[The following article, the text of a lecture given at an IFES conference held recently at Wheaton, Illinois, is published by permission of the author. Mr. Moucarry, of the Groupes Bibliques Universitaires in France, has written a new book, Un Arab chrétien face à l'Islam, which just came out in November.

Islam regards Jesus Christ as one of its greatest prophets. A number of Muslims have the name "Issa," the name given to Jesus in the Koran. The Koran testifies to the miraculous conception of Jesus by the virgin Mary (3:45-47; 19:16-22). This is why Jesus is often referred to as the "son of Mary." Just as Moses received the "Tawrat," David the "Zabur" and Mohammed the Koran, Jesus received the "Injil" (the Gospel). This book is a light and a guide for men (5:46). During his mission, Jesus was sustained by the Holy Spirit (2:87, 253; 5:110), whom Muslims generally consider to be the angel Gabriel. With God's permission, he performed numerous miracles, demonstrating that he was indeed a Messenger of God. Included among these miracles were healing of the sick and raising of the dead (3:49; 43:63).

The Koran confers a number of prestigious titles on Jesus. Among them are some which also occur in the Bible, such as "the word of God" (3:39) and "the Messiah" (3:45). As the Koran does not explain the meaning of these titles, Muslim commentators have given them various interpretations far removed from their biblical meanings.

Islam rejects the divinity of Jesus for a rather simple reason which can be summed up by the following alternative: either Jesus is the Son of God, in which case God is not One, or God is One and thus Jesus can in no way be His son. However, when we read the Koran, we see that it is refuting an incorrect understanding of the divinity of Jesus. According to this understanding, which is attributed to Christians, Jesus is the Son of God because of his miraculous conception (cf. 5:119); he is a man whom God has honoured by making him His Son (2:116; 6:101); lastly, he is one of three persons of a triad (4:171; 5:76) made up of God, Mary and himself (cf. 5:119). Clearly this is a long way from the Christian understanding of the divinity of Jesus and of the divine Trinity.

"No, they neither put him to death nor crucified him..."

Islam also rejects the crucifixion of Jesus, though for less clear reasons than his divinity. This rejection is based on a single Koranic text, which is confirmed by numerous texts of the Prophetic Tradition ("Sunna" or "Hadith"). This tradition constitutes the second foundation of Islam after the Koran. The text in question is found in the fourth Sura, entitled "Women." It is part of a long polemic directed against the Jews, who are accused, among other things, of putting to death many of the prophets, whose message they had rejected (4:155). Here is the text:

They (the Jews) maintain: 'We put to death Christ Jesus, the son of Mary, (who claimed to be) the Messenger of God'. They did not put him to death, nor did they crucify him but it seemed so to them. ... They certainly did not put him to death, but God took him up to Himself. God is powerful and wise. (Sura 4 "Women", verses 157-158)

According to Muslim tradition, at the moment when the Roman soldiers came to arrest Jesus, God intervened in order to save him from the sentence to which the Jews had condemned him. He took him up to Himself, while another man (Judas Iscariot according to some) was arrested in his place. God had in fact changed this man's appearance to make him look like Jesus. Neither the soldiers nor the Jews realized this, and this is why they wrongly believed they had crucified Jesus. This is how we are to understand the words "it seemed so to them"

Through this spectacular intervention on Jesus' behalf, God demonstrated at one and the same time His power and His wisdom. He showed His power by snatching His Messenger out of the grasp of his enemies who wanted to put him to death. He also proved that he was able to outsmart the Jews who had plotted against Jesus (cf. 3:54-55).

Still according to Muslim tradition, Jesus lives today in heaven with God. He will return at the end of time to exercise a second ministry on earth. As before, Jesus will preach monotheism, but this time he will be greatly successful. He will fight the Antichrist and triumph over him. He will establish a reign of justice and peace on the earth, which will last forty years according to some, a thousand years according to others. The Jews will believe in him and the Christians will be convinced that he is not the Son of God and that he was not crucified. Jesus will marry and have children. At the end of his life, he will die a natural death and be buried by the Muslims beside the prophet Mohammed. His death will give the signal for the general resurrection and the last judgment (cf. 43:61). In short, Jesus will be more than ever a prophet of Islam because he will lead all men to faith in God as Islam has always proclaimed it!

Why does Islam deny the crucifixion of Jesus?

The Koran gives no explicit reason which could explain why it claims that God did not allow the Jews to carry out their intention to put Jesus to death, when He let them do what they would to the prophets who came before Jesus. We are thus reduced to hypotheses when we seek to understand the reasons behind its denial of Jesus' crucifixion.

One of these hypotheses is the violent opposition of the Jews to the first Muslims. At Medina, which was the birthplace of the Muslim community, there were several Jewish tribes which did not adhere to Islam when it began to spread among the polytheistic Arab tribes in the city. This led to a force-based relationship between the two communities. In addition, the Jews were accused of plotting with the polytheistic Arabs in Mecca against the Muslims. The armed confrontation went in favour of the Muslims, who drove all the Jews out of

Medina. Could the extreme hostility between Muslims and Jews have led the former to reject all that the latter maintained? In this case, historic and religious reasons would be behind the Koran's rejection of Jesus' crucifixion.

But it is essentially religious reasons which seem to explain the Islamic position. If God intervened in such spectacular fashion on Jesus' behalf, this is because Jesus is not just any prophet. He occupies a privileged position among the prophets, a position comparable to that of Moses or indeed of Mohammed.

The pre-eminent position of Jesus is such that if God had abandoned him to his enemies, He would have gone back on His word, according to which He makes His Messengers triumph (40:51), as He does all who uphold His cause (22:40; 47:7). By coming to the aid of His illustrious prophet, God showed Himself faithful to His promise. If He had let the Jews triumph over Jesus by putting him to death, the prophetic mission of Jesus would have been called into question, and through Jesus, the very One who had sent him on this mission.

This explanation, which is based on a general Koranic principle, that is the faithfulness of God, is confirmed by the way in which the Koran refutes the Jews' claim that they crucified Jesus. The Jews claim to have put to death "Jesus Christ, the son of Mary, the Messenger of God." If the Jews had believed that Jesus was God's Messenger, they surely would not have sentenced him to death. They sentenced to death the man who said he was the Messenger of God. Now, the fact that they were able to put Jesus to death is the proof, according to them, that Jesus was not really the Messenger of God. Otherwise, how could God have allowed His Messenger to be put to death? The Koranic text opposes this argument with another argument which follows the same logic, that is, the impossibility of a great prophet being overcome by his enemies. As Jesus is indeed a very important Messenger of God, the Jews were not able to put him to death nor to crucify him. God rescued him out of their hands and took him up to Himself. Here we are faced with an alternative which puts Jews and Muslims in opposing camps: either Jesus is the Messenger of God and thus the Jews could not have put him to death, or else they did indeed put him to death and so he is not the Messenger of God.

Whether for historical, political or theological reasons, the Koran categorically denies the historicity of the crucifixion of Jesus: it quite simply did not take place. But Muslim theologians go further; they dispute the necessity of the cross, as well as its moral value. They dispute its necessity because, as they see it, man although a sinner, is not lost. He therefore has no need of salvation. God can grant man forgiveness for his sins by virtue of His sovereign will alone (cf. 16:40). He does not need a sacrifice to do so. They also dispute the moral value of the cross because man, as a highly responsible being must take responsibility for his actions and face their consequences (cf. 6:164; 99:7-8). Salvation by the death of a substitute seems doubly immoral to them: it amounts firstly to denying man's responsibility and secondly to condemning an innocent person.

Questions

- 1) Think about the different objections that Islam raises against the cross of Jesus. In your opinion, what is their importance, first from a human point of view, then from a Christian point of view?
- 2) Is there any similarity between the Muslim concept of Jesus and the concept of the Messiah that we find among Jesus' disciples in the Gospels? Consider the case of Peter in particular.
- 3) How did Jesus set about convincing his disciples about his death, before and after it took place? Can we follow his example in our encounters with Muslims?
- 4) Behind Muslim denial of the cross, there are on one hand the ideas of divine faithfulness, power, wisdom and sovereignty, and on the other the notion of human responsibility. Can we use these same principles to explain the cross of Jesus to Muslims? How?
- 5) What does the cross tell us about the character of God and man that is not found in Islam?

Comments

Here are several comments about the crucifixion of Jesus that can be useful in our discussions with Muslims.

* Unlike the Koran which denies the crucifixion of Jesus with a single text, there are two whole chapters in each of the Gospels which recount this event using many details that only an eyewitness could know.

* Jesus' own disciples were the first to refuse to accept the idea of their master being put to death. They were finally forced to accept it when the idea became a reality that they had to acknowledge.

* The circumstances of Jesus death revealed the cowardice of his disciples and especially of the "greatest" among them, the apostle Peter. Why would they have testified to an event which showed up their cowardice and recounted it so faithfully if this event had not taken place?

* Jesus himself was terrified by his imminent death. There was nothing heroic about the Son of God when he was faced with the death which, by his own admission, he would have preferred to avoid. It would be more logical from a human point of view either to deny his death, or not to say that he is the Son of God.

* Jesus' disciples would have more easily accepted him being taken up to heaven like Enoch and Elijah than they accepted his resurrection, which was a historically unprecedented event for them. Why did they believe in his resurrection rather than in him being taken up to God?
