

## ONE

# Jesus as God's Messenger in the Qur'an

One of the most important aspects of the Qur'an is the inclusiveness of its message. It does not limit the story of salvation to the emergence and later development of Islam; instead, it takes the story back to the beginning of humanity, the time of Adam, the first prophet of God in Islam. The chain that started with Adam continued through many prophets and ended with Muhammad, who is the final Prophet and confirms the absolute truthfulness of all prophetic messages. One of the links in this chain is Jesus, a possessor of steadfastness and one of the most important of God's prophets in Islam.

Islamic theological literature uses several terms for those who are appointed by God to convey His message. One of these terms is *al-rasul*, or the messenger. Linguistically speaking, the Arabic term *rasul* means the person who is commended by the sender of the message to either convey a message or to receive a message on behalf of the sender. Theologically speaking, "*al-rasul* is a human being who is sent by God to convey divine laws to the people."<sup>1</sup> Similarly there is another term used for the prophets of God, *al-nabi*. The Arabic term *nabi* "refers to the one who receives revelation through an angel, or for whom an inspiration comes to the heart or through wholesome dreams."<sup>2</sup> In theological terms, a *rasul* is higher than a *nabi* because a *rasul* receives a special revelation from God through the angel Gabriel; that is to say, every *rasul* is also a *nabi*, but not vice versa. Consequently, Jesus in Islam is both a *rasul* and a *nabi*. It is believed that there had been 124,000 prophets, or *nabi*, before the emergence of Islam. Of these only 313 were *rasul*. Among these were five *ul al-'azm*, the Possessors of Steadfastness. These five messengers of God are the most important of all the prophets and hold the highest spiritual rank of all human beings. In chronological order, these five are Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad. Therefore, Jesus is of paramount importance to Muslims not only because

he was a prophet confirmed by all Muslims but also because he is the closest in the chain of the prophethood of all divine messengers to Muhammad because of his temporal proximity and the fact that he revealed the good news of the coming of Muhammad.

Both Jesus and Mary are very important Qur'anic figures. Some Muslim theologians have debated whether Mary was one of the prophets since she received a revelation from God when angels (Qur'an 3:42–48) or “Our Spirit,” the angel Gabriel, gave her good news about her immaculate pregnancy and the miraculous birth of Jesus. Both Mary and Jesus deserve great attention and discussion, but this chapter will focus on Jesus as seen from the perspective of Islamic theology presented in the Qur'an.<sup>3</sup>

The Qur'an honors Jesus as a messenger of God whom Muslims must affirm as God's messenger. The Qur'an criticizes those who deny the divine messengers and says of them, “Alas for human beings, My servants! Never came there unto them a messenger but they did mock him” (36:30). This verse encompasses the stories of many prophets who came to declare the divine message to their people but were mocked while conveying the message of God. Jesus was not an exception. The conclusion one can draw from this is that the Qur'an considers all historical prophets who brought the message of the belief in one God to be prophets of God whether we know their names or not. Thousands of prophets of God may have walked the earth and we may know nothing about their names and locales.

The story of Jesus is one of the most well-known prophetic stories in the Qur'an. Chapter 3 of the Qur'an, “The Family of 'Imran,” discusses the matter of Jesus. As we shall examine, this chapter of the Qur'an speaks of Mary as chosen by God; Zachariah's care for her; Mary's encounter with angels; Jesus's birth; his miracles, which are performed with permission from God; the support of Jesus's disciples; and Jesus's “death” and ascension (3:42–64). Jesus is repeatedly mentioned by name in various chapters of the Qur'an. The Qur'an makes explicit connections between Jesus and the message of Islam. Those who were against Jesus were against the Qur'an as well, theologically speaking. Commanding Muslims to declare their belief in the message of Jesus, the Holy Book states: “Say we believe in God, in what is revealed to us and what is revealed to Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, and the Tribes. We believe in the Torah revealed to Moses, in the Gospel revealed to Jesus and in what is sent to the prophets, of their Lord; we make no division between any of them, and to God we surrender” (2:136).

In the fourth chapter, one of the longest, the Qur'an connects the message

of Muhammad to the message of Jesus and other prophets before them. It confirms that what was revealed to the Prophet of Islam was not something unprecedented but that he who was giving the revelation of the Qur'an to Muhammad was the same God who sent the divine message to the prophets before him. Jesus is mentioned as the predecessor of the Prophet of Islam. To indicate the universality of the message of Islam, the Qur'an touches on the history of divine revelation, which includes messengers of God such as Noah, Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, Jesus, Job, Jonah, Aaron, Solomon, and David (4:163). The following chapter further emphasizes the importance of the message of Jesus and its relationship with earlier messages, namely the Torah. Jesus does not reject the divine message sent before him; on the contrary, he accepts and confirms the message of the Torah. He came after all prophets ("We sent Jesus after them" [Qur'an 5:46]), but the closest to him among all prophets is the Prophet of Islam. In the Islamic eschatological scenario, Jesus and the Islamic messianic figure that represents the Prophet of Islam are hand in hand against "the Liar," or the false prophet known as the Antichrist. Both share the final victory over the Antichrist.

In "Mary," chapter 19 of the Qur'an, when Jesus miraculously speaks from his cradle, once again he declares his message to his people that he is the servant of God, that God revealed the Gospel to him, that God appointed him as a prophet, that God blessed him wherever he might be, and that God enjoined him to pray and give charity as long as he lived (19:30–31). The Qur'anic Jesus is a messenger of God to the children of Israel (3:49; 4:157; 5:75). His mission was to proclaim the monotheistic, ethical message of God. The Qur'an also presents him as the one who is supported by the holy spirit (2:87).<sup>4</sup>

Jesus is mentioned in more than ninety verses of the Qur'an. The Qur'anic Jesus is a receiver of divine scripture. God revealed to him a special message, al-Injil, the Islamic name for the Gospel (3:48, 5:46, 19:30, 57:27). The Qur'an refers to the Gospel as a source of guidance, light, and admonition for God-fearing people (5:46). Jesus made certain things that were forbidden to Israelites lawful, such as work on the Sabbath and some dietary items that had been restricted (3:50). Jesus called upon the people to become muslims, with a lowercase "m"—that is, to submit themselves to the will of God (5:116–17). Therefore, Muslims revere the followers and disciples of Jesus for their struggle in the way of God and their support for Jesus. Hence, because of their submission to the will of God, Muslims see them as fellow Muslims.

The Qur'anic Jesus is the Messiah (4:171–72), and his frequently used title, the Son of Mary, is mentioned in thirty-three verses of the Qur'an. In the Qur'an,

Jesus is given at least ten other titles: *al-nabi* (the prophet, 19:30), *al-rasul* (the messenger of God who received a scripture from God, 3:49), *min al-muqarrabin* (of those close to God, 3:45), *mubarak* (the blessed one, 19:31), *qawl al-Haq* (the true word, 19:34), *'abd Allah* (the servant of God, 4:172), *kalimat Allah* (the word of God, 4:171), *kalimat Minh* (a word from Him, 3:45), *ruh Allah* (a spirit from God, 21:91 and 66:12), *wajeeh* (a person of distinction, 3:45), and confirmer of the Torah (3:50). The Qur'anic Jesus speaks as a precursor of Muhammad and consoles his disciples by giving them good news of the coming of Muhammad after him: "Jesus, son of Mary, said: O Children of Israel! Lo! I am the messenger of Allah unto you, confirming what was revealed before me, the Torah, and giving good tidings of a messenger who shall come after me, whose name shall be Ahmad" (61:6). The names Ahmad and Muhammad are derived from the same root, a word connoting "the praised one." According to Muslim theologians, the good news about Muhammad in the Qur'an is paralleled by verses in the Gospel of John, where Jesus speaks of the Paraclete, or comforter (14:16). Historically, Muslim theologians have been nearly unanimous in believing that the Greek word for "comforter" in John's gospel refers to Muhammad. Therefore, Muhammad is considered to be both the seal of the prophets and the fulfillment of Jesus's message.

From a Muslim perspective, theologically speaking, the essence of the message of Muhammad is consistent with the original ethical and pastoral teachings of Jesus. Any difference is due to the different contexts in which the two men lived. According to Islamic teaching, when Jesus came as a messenger of God to convey the divine message, he needed certain social conditions before he could proclaim his message, conditions that would prove its truthfulness. For example, in his time healing was a very important practice in the community; therefore, God supported Jesus with miracles of healing. Jesus was able to raise the dead to life, heal lepers, and give sight to the blind. These were all possible through permission from God, not through Jesus's own power. On the other hand, when Muhammad came to proclaim the same message of God, his society was dominated by the culture of eloquence in Arabic poetry and prose. Therefore, his major miracle was given in the form of an eloquent book, the Qur'an, which invited all composers of Arabic literature to replicate its eloquence.

Muhammad, by bringing his community from idol worship to worship of the one true God, has fulfilled the message that Jesus and all other prophets of God had proclaimed. The Prophet of Islam was able, in twenty-three years, to change the entire Arabian Peninsula and make the divine message dominant

not only in the political arena but also in the hearts and minds of the people. What Muhammad achieved in such a short period of time was unprecedented. The Qur'anic message suggests that when Jesus announced the coming of Muhammad, he was giving the good news of the coming of a messenger of God who would bring an end to the suffering of people and would succeed in teaching about belief in one God.

Jesus's place in the Qur'an as one of the great prophets of God is a highly revered position in Islam. Sunni theologians agree that since the time of the Prophet, the highest people in religious rank after Muhammad in the Islamic community are the four caliphs, Abu Bakr, 'Umar, 'Uthman, and 'Ali, of which Abu Bakr comes first. However, even Abu Bakr cannot reach the spiritual rank of Jesus. Jesus is a prophet and a messenger of God who speaks on behalf of God, while Abu Bakr is not a prophet but a companion of the final prophet of God, Muhammad.

Jesus's proper name in the Qur'an is 'Isa, the Arabic equivalent of Jesus. Medieval Muslim theologians and linguists have developed a sizable body of literature on the terms and names used for Jesus in the Qur'an and on the origin of these names and titles.<sup>5</sup> The name 'Isa is mentioned twenty-five times in the Holy Book of Islam.<sup>6</sup>

While the Qur'an teaches that Jesus was a messenger of God who brought a divine message to humanity, it does not contend that he was God or a part of God. The Qur'an warns people about this: "They are unbelievers who say, 'God is the Messiah, Mary's son.' Say, [O Muhammad<sup>7</sup>]: 'Who then shall overrule God in any way if He desires to destroy the Messiah, Mary's son, and his mother, and all those who are on earth?' For to God belongs the kingdom of the heavens and of the earth, and all that is between them. He creates what He wills. God is all powerful" (5:17).

The word "Messiah" in the Qur'an is a title of Jesus and is not used for any other individual in the Holy Book. The term "messiah" is a common term used by Muslims, Jews, and Christians, but they each apply a different meaning to the term. In the Jewish tradition, the messiah is a job description that includes bringing peace, ending injustice, and securing the return of Jews to the land of Israel. The Islamic messianic figure will also bring justice, prosperity, and peace to the world. However, neither Muslims nor Jews consider their messiah to be divine. In this regard, one can argue that there is an alignment between Jews and Muslims in contradistinction to Christianity. However, by using this title for Jesus, the Qur'an does not make any connection between Jesus and the messianic expectations of the Old Testament.