

Christmas and Jesus in The Context of Islam

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[Part 1 of 5]

Introduction

Every year on the eve of Christmas, as Muslims living in a Christian environment, we wonder what to do on that occasion; what to tell our children if they ask us questions, and how to answer questions from our friends at work. The question which is typically asked of us and our children in the schools is, “Do you celebrate Christmas?” What should be our answer? What do we teach our children to answer?

I am familiar with two extremes among our people.¹ In every school, nowadays, there is a Christmas party and some parents are of the opinion “‘When in Rome, do as the Romans do’, so, kids, enjoy life.” These are the parents who put up a Christmas tree in their houses, decorate it, and maybe even put some gifts under it. Such practices, of course, will never affect the adults, but they will implant in the minds of children the idea that this is what Muslims, also, do. As a result, those parents who have Christmas trees in their houses are going too far. And it should not be that way. And then, later, we blame the children. They are not to be blamed, but

we, the adults, are to be blamed. On the other extreme are those parents who tell their kids plainly: “NO. No Christmas party; it is not our business; Christmas is not ours; we should not participate. We should not even say merry Christmas to our friends in school.” I think this, too, is wrong. Normally, there is a sort of sharing, and there is a courtesy for friends and neighbors. You should congratulate them on their special occasion, as you would expect them to congratulate you on your occasion.

My practice in this regard has been that I have never stopped my children from participating in Christmas activities in their schools, but the role which they played was to prepare and deliver a little speech about “Jesus in the Qur’an”. By doing this, the kids are not only sharing, but working like preachers; in effect, they are another sort of Jimmy Swaggart. In this way, Muslims benefit from such an occasion because a lot of people in this society don’t know that Muslims believe in Jesus. They think that Islam is a completely different religion and it has nothing to do with Christianity. So we have to let the people know what we are and what our faith is all about, that truly we believe in Jesus, we believe in the Bible, and that Islam

¹ The Muslim community living in Toledo

is a continuation of the heavenly message which was started by Adam and culminated in Muhammad, *‘alayhi as-salato wa-s-salaam*.² If we are not to be too far to the left, or too far to the right, but to take the middle position, which is the Islamic way, then, what should we say or do?

If we are asked, “Do you celebrate Christmas?” it is very easy to take the easy way out of this situation because if you answer “Yes” it will mean that we celebrate Christmas in the same fashion as it is done in America, which is wrong for Muslims, and wrong for Christians. We know that Christmas is commercialized – all based around buying gifts – and during the three-day holiday everyone is geared up for it by indulging in every action which Jesus himself would refrain from. So, if we say “Yes” we celebrate it, it means we agree with what is going on. If we say we don’t celebrate it, it signals to them that we don’t believe in Jesus.

I went to talk to the priest from the Baptist Church in Perrysburg, Ohio, who sent Arabic Bibles to some Muslim homes. He said to me, “We feel sorry for the Muslims”. I asked him why. He said, “Because they are not saved since they do not accept Jesus. We would like those people to go to heaven, not to hell. That is why we are sending Bibles in Arabic.” I brought up that issue of sending the Arabic Bibles in the clergy meeting here in Perrysburg, and they sent me a letter, signed by several churches in Perrysburg, indicating that the action of the Baptist Church was wrong and that they disagreed with it.³

So, what I would like to arrive at is that we neither reject nor accept their Christmas, but we have our own way and our own approach. When we celebrate the birthday of Muhammad,⁴ we celebrate it by studying his life, learning how much he suffered in propagating the Islamic call, and then instilling this information in the minds of our children. Further, we celebrate it by teaching our children some of the qualities of the Prophet Muhammad: how he was patient and tolerant while facing his enemies. Although he propagated his call among people who were antagonistic towards him and his message in every way, but because of his methods and his tolerance, he was able to get the message of Islam to establish a

foothold during his life. That is the way in which we celebrate the birthday of the Prophet Muhammad. Therefore, if we were to celebrate the birthday of the Prophet Jesus, *‘alayhi-s-alato wa-s-salaam*, we would celebrate it in the same way because Jesus and Muhammad came with the same message.

The term “Christianity” is a new term and nowhere in the Bible will you find that term mentioned even once, and that’s because there is no such religion. The term “Christian” or “Christianity”, when analyzed linguistically, indicates “The people who are worshipping Christ” which is not acceptable in Islam in the same manner as when someone calls us “Muhammadan” instead of Muslim. We do not accept that characterization because the word “Muhammadan” indicates a person who worships Muhammad, and we don’t do that. We, the Muslims, refer to the followers of Jesus, in Arabic, as *na-sā-ra*. *Nasāra* is taken from the verb *na-sa-ra* which means “to support”. A person who supports Jesus is called *nasāni*.

The term Islam means, “surrender to God”, or “to submit one’s self to God”. Practicing that “submission to the will of God” is equivalent to practicing Islam, and the one who practices that submission to the will of God is called muslim.⁵ What did Jesus say to his people? He exhorted them to submit to God just like Moses said to his people to submit themselves to God; Adam said to his children to submit themselves to God. This submission to God, propagated by Adam, Moses, Jesus, and all the prophets, is called Islam. And this indicates to us the unity of the message of God. The Qur’an relates that when Jesus felt that his people were going to reject his faith, he asked them: “Who will be my supporters to the way of God?” His disciples said: “We are your supporters; we believe in God and be witness that we are *muslims*.”⁶ They did not say, “Be witness that we are Christians.” That word “muslim” here is not capitalized – it is not the same as the word “Muslim” as we know it and understand it today – it is not a proper noun applicable to the people living in Saudi Arabia and Egypt and Pakistan, but it is an *adjective* which means “submitter to the will of God”. Any person who is a “submitter to the will of God” is a *muslim*. The response of Jesus’ disciples can be rephrased and properly translated into English as: Be witness, O Jesus, that we believe in God and be witness that we are *muslims* i.e. we submit ourselves to the will of God or we surrender our

² Upon him be prayers and peace

³ The letter is printed in the January/February 1990 issue of the *Monitor* which is the bi-monthly publication of the Islamic Center of Greater Toledo.

⁴ The last messenger of God, succeeding Jesus six centuries later.

⁵ Note that, because the word is an adjective and not a noun, it is not capitalized

⁶ 3:52

will to the will of God. In other words, those disciples accepted the message of Jesus; the message of Jesus was “submit to the rules of God” and submission to the rules of God is called Islam. Thus, those who accepted the message of Jesus were *muslim*. The terms “Muslim” and “Islam” are not specific to the message of Muhammad, but these are terms which are specific to the Message of God revealed to the inhabitants of the earth. God has sent a series of revelations to earth, starting with Adam and completed at the time of Muhammad, but the Message of God is *one and the same* throughout the ages. Thus, the religion of Adam is Islam, the religion of Noah is Islam, the religion of Abraham is Islam, the religion of Moses is Islam, the religion of Jesus is Islam, and the religion of Muhammad is Islam. The followers of all these messengers – from Adam down to Muhammad – submitted themselves to the will of God – they were *muslim* – and they accepted the Message of God which is *one and the same* throughout the ages: man’s complete *surrender to the Will of God* – Islam.

This Message came down in the form of *The Scrolls* to the Prophet Ibrāhīm,⁷ in the form of *Az-Zabūr* or the Psalms to the Prophet David, in the form of the *Torah* or the Old Testament to the Prophet Moses, in the form of *Al-Injeel* or the New Testament to the Prophet Jesus, and in the form of the *Qur’an* to the Prophet Muhammad. The Muslims believe in these five books revealed by God to humanity. Every generation of humanity, according to its intellectual maturity and ability, was given a part of that message and it was completed at the time of Muhammad in the form of the final Revelation, the *Qur’an*. As a result, we find that the last Qur’anic verse revealed to the Prophet Muhammad, 80 days prior to his death, says: [God speaks] “Today I have perfected for you your religion and completed my favor upon you and I have accepted *Islam* as your faith” [5:3].

Judaism and Christianity are linked together because a part of the Bible of the Christians is called *Al’Ahd al-Qadeem*⁸ which is referred to in the *Qur’an* as the *Torah*, and it was revealed to Moses. The second part of the Bible is called *Al’Ahd al-Jadeed*⁹ which was revealed to Jesus, *alayhi-s-salam*,¹⁰ and it is mentioned in the *Qur’an* as *Al-Injeel*. The *Torah* was revealed as the Constitution to be followed by the Israelites, and it

consisted of laws and rules for shaping the behavior of the followers of Moses, exactly like the *Qur’an*. Certain harsh laws had been imposed upon the Jews for some sins they had committed in their time. When the Bible came through Jesus, it came to confirm what was revealed to Moses, and at the same time, to make life easier for the Christians by rescinding some of the laws previously imposed upon the Jews. The *Qur’an* says that Jesus advised the Israelites thus: “And I have come to confirm the truth of whatever there still remains of the *Torah*, and to make lawful unto you some of the things which aforetime were forbidden to you. And I have come unto you with a message from your Sustainer; remain, then, conscious of God, and pay heed unto me.”¹¹ So these two messages, the Old Testament (Judaism) and the New Testament (Christianity), are in fact complementary: one comprised The Laws (the *Torah*), and the other included everything related to moral conduct (The Bible).

As Muslims, our definition of the *Torah* is: *The Word of God* revealed to Moses. Our definition of the *Injeel* or Bible is: *The Word of God* revealed to Jesus. In the same manner, we say the *Qur’an* is the *Word of God* revealed to Muhammad. But the word of God revealed to Moses and Jesus does not exist nowadays; instead, what we have nowadays, in the form of the Bible, is the word of St. Matthew, the word of St. Luke, the word of St. John, and the word of St. Mark, named after the respective authors. These writers collected as much as they knew about the teachings of Jesus and put them in a book. The Muslims, therefore, don’t consider the current Bible(s) as the *word of God* but consider it a collection of the teachings of Jesus as seen by his disciples. St. Paul is a very important person in Christianity and his writings are in the Bible, also. Paul was originally a Jew. Some Christians revere him, but others say he spoiled Christianity. So, technically, there is no Bible because you find that there is no word of God in it. It is the word of the authors: Matthew’s Bible, St. Luke’s Bible, St. John’s Bible; there is the Bible of Mark, the Barnabas Bible and many, many others. Only the first four are recognized by the Church nowadays, but there are many more bibles like the Book of Mormons, the Book of Jehovah’s Witnesses, and other books. Even the Bible, until the year 1952, consisted of 72 books or chapters. The versions of the Bible printed after 1952 consist of only 66 books. Six books are omitted and this is the version currently known as the St. James Version. At the present

⁷ Abraham

⁸ The Old Testament

⁹ The New Testament

¹⁰ Peace be upon him

¹¹ 3:50

time,¹² a new version is in the process of being updated; God knows what it will look like. It's coming. Very soon it will appear – another new, modern version for the Bible.¹³ If we, the Muslims, are to compare the Bible with something in Islam, we can analogize it with *hadith*¹⁴ because the hadith is not the word of the Prophet, and it is not the word of God. When we talk about hadith, we say that Abu Hurayrah¹⁵, *radia-Allahu 'an*,¹⁶ said he heard so-and-so say, that he heard so-and-so say, that he heard so-and-so say..." and so on. It is a series of people narrating what they heard from the Prophet, and it is *in their own words*. That is why when we talk about hadith, we have to be very careful because the human element transmitted it. There were truthful people, but there were people who told lies about the Prophet, and there were people who were not even Muslim, who invented ahadith¹⁷ and inserted them in Islam, a great many of which, until now, are to be found in our books of tafseer;¹⁸ and ordinary people, whose knowledge is limited, take them for granted as being the words the Prophet spoke.

This reminds me of people who seek to explain the Qur'an their own way, or, according to their understanding, or to serve their own purpose. I just read two pages entitled "Understanding Islam". These pages are a summary of a lecture given by a priest reputed to be very well versed in comparative religion. He is a lecturer, talks about different religions, and he is very prominent among his parishioners and among academia.¹⁹ And if you read those two pages, you will get sick to the stomach about the way he wants people to understand Islam. Let me give you just one example. He says Islam discriminates between blacks and whites, and to back up his statement, according to him, "Even the Qur'an says that the whites will go to heaven and that the blacks will go to hell." He states, "If you would like to know more about that, read Chapter 'Al-i-'Imraan'²⁰ verse number 106." What does that

verse say? [Imam quotes the verse. The English translation is:]

"On the Day of Judgment when some faces will shine with happiness (*tabyaddu wuquhuen*) and some faces will be dark with grief (*taswaddu wuquhuen*). And as for those with faces darkened, they shall be told: 'Did you deny the truth after having attained to faith? Taste, then, this suffering for having denied the truth!' But as for those with faces shining, they shall be within God's grace, therein to abide" [3:106-107].

The Qur'an, in that verse, is warning people about the Day of Judgment, and describing that Day as a day when some people's faces will be shining and bright because they feel they have done good during their life, while the faces of other people will be sad and darkened because they know they have done evil during their life. Those in the first category will go to heaven and those in the second category will go to hell. See how he slants the interpretation? That priest, to serve his purpose, to show that Islam is a stupid religion and that it discriminates between blacks and whites, purports to show that even the Qur'an is saying that blacks will go to hell and whites to heaven. If that is the case, then the majority of Muslims are going to hell because all of us are black!

That illustrates the difficulty in translation and in explanation from Arabic to another language. There are a lot of metaphorical words mentioned in the Qur'an. They don't mean what the dictionary meaning of the word would suggest. *Bayad* (derived from *abyad* = white) means: shining, looking bright, smiling, pleased. That is what *tabyaddu wuquhuen*²¹ means in that context. *Aswad* means black and *taswaddu wuquhuen*²² means to be sad, to feel sadness, to feel that they did not do their duties at the time when they were supposed to. So the priest took the words literally, served his purpose, and jumped to the conclusion that the Qur'an is saying the black people will go to hell and the white people will go to heaven.

In the same manner, an Egyptian priest here in Detroit,²³ who has written a book comparing Islam with Christianity, maintains that Jesus is, for sure, above and better than Muhammad "because even the Qur'an says so". He supported his saying with the Qur'anic verse: "And lo! The angels said: O Mary! Behold, God has elected thee and made thee pure, and raised thee above all the women of the world."

¹² In the year 1995

¹³ The 21st century King James Version

¹⁴ A report or account of what the Prophet said

¹⁵ One of the companions of the Prophet Muhammad - (equivalent to one of the disciples of Jesus)

¹⁶ May God be pleased with him

¹⁷ Plural of hadith

¹⁸ Qur'anic exegesis

¹⁹ Imam did not mention his name or exact locality, and I was unable to find more specific information

²⁰ Chapter 3 in the Qur'an

²¹ Those with white faces (literal translation)

²² Those with black faces (literal translation)

²³ Imam did not mention his name

²⁴ Therefore, according to him, this means that Mary was better than Amina²⁵ because she was preferred over her, and, in turn, the son of Mary will be preferred over the son of Amina. Therefore, Jesus is better than Muhammad. This is how people play with certain verses, while we have it very clear in the Qur'an that all the messengers of God are equal. [Imam quotes Arabic verse. The translation is:]

“Say: ‘We believe in God, and in that which has been bestowed from on high upon us, and which has been bestowed upon Abraham and Ishmael and Isaac and Jacob and their descendants, and that which has been vouchsafed to Moses and Jesus, and that which has been vouchsafed to all the other prophets by their Sustainer: we make no distinction between any of them. And it is unto Him that we surrender ourselves” [2:136].

The Qur'anic verse is very clear: no one is preferred over the others. We, the Muslims, are commanded to believe in this Qur'an bestowed upon Muhammad, and in all the previous Revelations. It is a very clear-cut verse. Why does one ignore a clear-cut verse like that while quoting a verse which could be interpreted in many ways? It is just to serve

one's own purpose. This demonstrates to Muslims, especially the Arabs, that not everyone who can read the Qur'an is able to explain it. Explaining the Qur'an is a very demanding science which takes years to study and master: you have to know why that verse was revealed, what was the context in which it was revealed, and what is the role of the Arabic language in that context in order to know what it means. The role of people who study and specialize in Arabic language is to get these Qur'anic verses and dissect them, just as doctors dissect a body, to know their secrets, and find out what they mean. So it is a very difficult science that not everyone can tackle, especially when it comes to the language of the Qur'an, which is of a very high type and high style among the dialects of the Arabic language.

When we read about the creation of Adam in the Bible, we find it is identical to what is in the Qur'an, so we say, yes, that part in the Bible is correct because it matches the Qur'an. But in other instances, what is written in the Bible is entirely contradictory to what is written in the Qur'an, and that can be ascribed to the role played by the human authors of the Bible.

²⁴ 3:42

²⁵ The mother of Muhammad

Christmas and Jesus in The Context of Islam

Imam A. M. Khattab

[Part 2 of 5]

The Prophet Zakarīya The Birth of Mary and John, the Baptist

The story of Jesus, in the Qur'an, starts a long way before his birth; it starts even before the birth of his mother Maryam.²⁶ There is a whole chapter in the Qur'an called Surat 'Al-e-'Imran or the "Family of 'Imrān". This chapter talks mostly about that family from which Jesus descended, and, at the same time, it tells us that all the messengers of God share the same roots; they are related to each other. [Imam quotes Arabic verses. The English translation is:]

"Behold God raised Adam, and Noah, and the Family of Abraham, and the Family of 'Imrān above all mankind, in one line of descent" [3:33, 34].

All of them are descendants of the same family. That shows the unity of the message of Islam as revealed to Adam all the way down to Muhammad, *'alayhi-s-salato wa-s-salaam*. God selected Adam and Nūh,²⁷ and He selected the Family of Ibrāhīm²⁸ and the Family of 'Imrān. The first two are

individuals, and the last two are families. From these two families came a good number of the prophets and messengers. Ibrāhīm had two sons, 'Ismāil and Ishāq,²⁹ both prophets. After that came Sayyidna Yaqoob,³⁰ descendant of Ishāq, and he had 12 children; from among them, Yūsuf³¹ was a prophet. From the family of 'Imrān came Jesus, Zakarīya³² and Yahya³³— all messengers. Maryam was a member of this family, also. Adam is not only the first human being, but he was also the first messenger; God selected Adam to be a messenger to convey the message to his children, at the start of the creation of human beings.

A pregnant woman normally anticipates that if her unborn child is a baby boy she will name him so-and-so. And, if a baby girl, she will name her so-and-so. And the mother hopes that her son will be a physician one day, or an engineer; and when the child becomes four or five years old, and you ask

²⁶ Mary

²⁷ Noah

²⁸ Abraham

²⁹ Ishmael and Isaac

³⁰ The Prophet Jacob

³¹ Joseph

³² Biblical spelling: Zachariah

³³ John, the Baptist

him what he would like to be in the future, he says, “A garbage man!”

What did the mother of Maryam want her unborn baby to be? She wanted her baby to be dedicated to the service of God. The story starts by telling us that the “wife of ‘Imrān” – the mother of Maryam – was pregnant and she dedicated the child in her womb for the service of God, praying: “O my Sustainer! Behold, unto Thee do I vow the child that is in my womb, to be devoted to Thy service, and for the service of your house of worship. Accept it, then, from me: verily, Thou alone art all-hearing, all-knowing.”³⁴ That really is the start of the story of Jesus and you don’t find this in the Bible.

It was the custom at that time that the ones dedicated for the service of God, and for the service of the houses of worship – the priests and monks – were men. So the mother of Maryam, while she was pregnant, dedicated the child in her womb for the service of the house of worship assuming that it was going to be a boy. When she delivered her baby, it happened to be a girl, so there was a problem. That infant was dedicated for religion, assuming that it would be a boy, but it happened to be a girl. *Fu*,³⁵ the mother of Maryam felt sad and sorry that she had vowed that this infant was dedicated for a job which was reserved for a man. So she prayed: [Imam quotes Arabic verse. The translation is:]

“But when she had given birth to the child, she said: ‘O my Sustainer! I have given birth to a female’ – the while God had been fully aware of what she would give birth to, and fully aware that no male child she might have hoped for could ever have been like this female – ‘and I have named her Mary. And, verily, I seek Thy protection for her and her offspring against Satan, the accursed’ ” [3:36].

Today, in the Christian churches, there is a big fuss around the question of whether a woman can be a priest or not. There is some voting here and some voting there and the bishops and the archbishops hold meetings to discuss “Can a woman be a priest or not?” And they take it one step further, sometimes, and ask: “Can you refer to God as He or She?” That’s a very big topic nowadays. I attended the Episcopalian Convention in Detroit last year [1989] where they voted that a woman could be a priest and there was some discussion, also,

about whether God could be referred to as “He” or “She”.

Why is the man always the priest and not the woman? When non-Muslim people come here to our mosque, and they see that partition in the prayer room,³⁶ they ask what that partition is for. When informed that it is to segregate males from females, they say “The poor Muslim lady; she is not equal to the man.” But we solve that problem right away by saying that when Islam recommended segregation between males and females *during the prayer* it is for the dignity of the woman. I would like not only any Muslim lady, but any American lady, to tell me if she will accept a man to pray behind her while she is prostrating. That is the consideration of Islam in this respect. Islam recommended the woman to be an imam,³⁷ not only to lead the prayers for women, but to be an imam in the field of education, or anything else. This precept of Islam is exemplified by the life and work of ‘Aiysha, the daughter of AbuBakr and the wife of the Prophet, who narrated one-third of the hadith. And the Prophet said, “Take half of your religion from ‘Aiysha” – *a woman*. See what kind of an honor this is while the Christian churches today – in the 20th century – are arguing about whether the woman can be a priest or not. And what was the mother of Jesus originally? *She was a priest in the temple*. God accepted her: **فَتَقَبَّلَهَا رَبُّهَا بِقَبُولٍ حَسَنٍ** (“Right graciously did her Lord accept her”). God accepted Mary to be a priest for the service of the temple while the Christian churches in the 20th century are debating if the woman can be a priest or not. Even before Jesus came into existence, she was a priest. I don’t know if we can find something like that in the Bible or not. And if our women here, in Toledo, are ready for a woman imam, I could get one tomorrow because there are female imam graduates of Al-Azhar now, and they send them overseas.

In the olden times there were priests, and the priests were males. We know that Catholic priests are not permitted to marry, and it looks like this prohibition is now applicable to the Catholics only; they say he has to be dedicated to the mission and the presence of a wife would distract him. You know, in the eyes of lots of men, it is always the women who make some sort of trouble, but, not in my eyes, so don’t blame

³⁴ 3:35

³⁵ A connecting letter in Arabic language, that connects a previous idea with a following idea, and can be translated as “then” or “so” depending on the context.

³⁶ The prayer room in the Islamic Center consists of one big octagonal hall under the dome, with a three-foot high partition along the center. The women pray on the left side of the partition and the men pray on the right side.

³⁷ Leader

me. Similarly, there are nuns – women dedicated for the service of the faith – and they, also, don't marry. That is still applicable to the Catholics. In the rest of the Christian denominations, the priests are marrying now, and there are no nuns among them, except if she is appointed as a priest, according to new developments which have taken place in the last ten years.

“O God, I have delivered a female.” This is called in Arabic grammar *jumlaḥ i'tiradiyyah*. It means a sentence which we can do without; if it is not there it will not alter the meaning, but, if it is there, it provides some more detail or information. [Imam quotes verse 3:36 again:]

“O my Sustainer! I have given birth to a female’ – the while God had been fully aware of what she would give birth to, and fully aware that no male child she might have hoped for could ever have been like this female – ‘and I have named her Mary. And, verily, I seek Thy protection for her and her offspring against Satan, the accursed.”

There are secrets in this verse if we read between the lines. “I seek refuge in You, for her and her descendants, from the devil.” What is the assumption here? What is the prediction? The mother of Maryam is assuming, or prophesying, that Maryam is going to have children. But, if she is assigned to serve the temple, then it is supposed that she will not marry so how will she have descendants?³⁸ And Maryam is just a newborn infant but her mother is visualizing her as having children, and so she is seeking refuge in God from the devil for her descendents. This is a point which shows us that there was a communication between God and that woman – the mother of Maryam. And that tells us the *wahy*³⁹ was not limited to men only, but *wahy* came to women, also.

Then the second bomb comes:

فَتَقَبَّلَهَا رَبُّهَا بِقَبُولٍ حَسَنٍ

“And so her Sustainer accepted her with goodly acceptance.” It means that God accepted her. God accepted Maryam to be a priest for the service of the temple in spite of being a female.

³⁸ This statement of Imam’s would have been an excellent topic of lively discussion with him. Is Imam applying the *present* Catholic Law to Mary? The Prophet Zakariya was the chief priest of the temple and he was married. What exactly did Imam mean?

³⁹ Communication between God and a human being: inspiration

وَأَنْبَتَهَا نَبَاتًا حَسَنًا means, “And brought her up, reared her, to fit that position” [3:37].

The whole tradition of the society was upset. Traditionally, the person taking care of the temple, or the house of worship, was a male, but now, here was a female. And her God accepted her to act like a man and to take the job of the man:

فَتَقَبَّلَهَا رَبُّهَا بِقَبُولٍ حَسَنٍ . I am quoting this from the Qur’an, and I leave it for you to think it over because, nowadays, Muslims, when they come to the mosque to eat, they build a curtain between males and females, putting the males on one side and females on the other, and we say “this is Islam”, while the Qur’an is saying to us

فَتَقَبَّلَهَا رَبُّهَا بِقَبُولٍ حَسَنٍ

– her God accepted her to act like a man and to take the job of a man.

وَكَفَّلَهَا زَكَرِيَّا⁴⁰. You know, when someone

immigrates from back home, we say he needs *kafeel*. “Kafeel” means someone to sponsor him. Sponsoring someone means you are ready to provide room and board, should it become necessary, so the person will not become a public charge and rely on welfare. That is the meaning of “kafeel”. Qur’an translators sometimes translate that word as “guardian” but it is not right. The word “guardian” does not fit here. “Sponsor” is more appropriate. A sponsor is someone who facilitates life for a person until that person can stand up on his feet and is able to earn his living by himself. So, who was the *kafeel* of Maryam? It was the Prophet Zakariya.

What happened? Did Zakariya feed her? No. Whenever Zakariya entered Maryam’s chamber in the *mehrab*,⁴¹ he would find that she was provided for. So he asked her, “From where did you get those provisions?” She replied, “It is from God. He provides for some people with no end.” At that time, something stirred inside the heart of Zakariya; that little girl moved his feelings, and he yearned to have children because he had none.

Zakariya, at that time, was a very, very old man. His wife was a very, very old woman and they had no children. But when he saw Mary dedicated to the house of worship, and

⁴⁰ “To the care of Zakariya was she assigned.”

⁴¹ The niche where the prayer is performed

provisions from God coming to her, something stirred in his heart, and he wished, he yearned for a child of his own. So he prayed: “O God, grant me a good and pious descendant. Give me some children! Thou indeed hearest all prayer” [3:38].

His prayer was answered and the *bushra* or the good news came *immediately*. The angel called him while he was praying in the sanctuary and said: “God is giving you the glad news that you will have a child whose name will be Yāhya.”⁴² And because Zakarīya had prayed to Allah to give him a *pious* child, a *righteous* child, a *good* child, like this girl, so the good news of Yāhya was announced to him and he was given some further description of the attributes of that child. Four qualities were mentioned:

1) مُصَدِّقًا بِكَلِمَةٍ مِّنَ اللَّهِ: He is going to be a believer in Jesus. Notice that Jesus is not born yet. But, the Qur’an informs us that the news of the birth of Jesus came much before him. Who is “kalimatīn minallah”? *It is Jesus!* They call him *Kalimatullah*⁴³ even in the Bible. In Chapter Maryam,⁴⁴ it says, “God gives you the glad tiding of one word (*kalima*) of His.” What is that word or *kalima*? It is كُن⁴⁵. In Chapter Maryam, the Qur’an states: “His order is, whenever He wants something, to say to it ‘Be’, and it is!” So the “word of God” means it was the *order of God* for Jesus to “Be” and he was, without a father: a sign of the power and the ability of God. So that is why he was named *Kalimatullah*. His creation came about with one word, “Be”, and he was.

2) وَسَيِّدًا: He will be a master among his people.

3) وَحَصُورًا: means he will devote himself unceasingly to the worship of Allah. He will keep himself away from sins and desires – he will be capable of fighting himself (utterly chaste).

4) وَنَبِيًّا مِّنَ الصَّالِحِينَ: and he will be a prophet among the righteous people.

So these are the four attributes of Yāhya.

Now, imagine here, a head-on crash: Zakarīya prays to Allah to give him a child, and when the news of the child

came, he said: “O God, how can I have a child?” But you just prayed for one and God gave him to you! Why are you asking that question again?⁴⁶ But there is a reason: it is because his having a son is opposite to the expectations which we are familiar with. What are the expectations? We know that no child can be born, in general, except when a man has intercourse with a woman and that results in conception. And there is a restriction on that also: that a woman has to be young, less than 55 years of age, or the woman will not get pregnant. The wife of Zakarīya, at that time, was in her upper eighties or nineties. So Zakarīya is saying, “How can I have a child and I am an old man and my wife is barren? She can’t get pregnant; she is not good for having children. How will this take place?” The answer came to him: “Whatever God wills, it will take place.” See the simplicity of the story, as it is narrated in the Qur’an? We don’t find this in the Bible at all. All that I have covered today is not to be found in the Bible. And it was supposed to be there because it is their story.

[Imam quotes Arabic verses, then explains] Zakariya said: O God, give me some sign, or something, to comfort me, and to enable me to face the people when they see the birth of my son which is against the laws of nature because we are above age. [The English translation of these verses is:]

“In that self-same place, Zakariya prayed unto his Sustainer, saying: “O my Sustainer! Bestow upon me, too, out of Thy grace, the gift of goodly offspring; for, Thou indeed, hearest all prayer. Thereupon, as he stood praying in the sanctuary, the angels called out unto him: “God sends thee the glad tiding of the birth of John, who shall confirm the truth of a Word from God, and shall be outstanding among men, and utterly chaste, and a prophet from among the righteous.

Zakarīya exclaimed: “O my Sustainer! How can I have a son when old age has already overtaken me, and my wife is barren?” Answered the angel: “Thus it is: God does what He wills.” Zakarīya prayed: “O my Sustainer, appoint a sign for me!” Said the angel: “Thy sign shall be that for three days thou wilt not speak unto men other than by gestures. And remember thy Sustainer unceasingly, and extol His limitless glory by night and by day” [3:33-41].

Zakarīya was scared. It’s not always the woman who is scared; the man, sometimes, gets scared too. Maryam got scared because she became pregnant and she was not married. She was apprehensive; how will she answer the people if they

⁴² Called John, the Baptist, in the Bible

⁴³ The Word of God

⁴⁴ Chapter 19 in the Qur’an

⁴⁵ “Be”

⁴⁶ Imam states with a tender, good-natured laugh

ask her where she got the baby. She was scared of the people. In the same manner, Zakarīya was scared. He was anticipating that the people would say things, like: "How did you get that baby; how did your wife get pregnant if she is that old and you are an old man? Does that mean you went with a young woman or something?" He prayed, O God, give me a sign with which to prove to the people that what has taken place is true. God said, your sign is that you are not to talk to the people except by signals. And we find a similarity here. When Maryam was apprehensive about being questioned, the Qur'an said the same to her – don't talk; say, I have vowed abstinence from talking: "...And if thou shouldst see any human being, convey this unto him: 'Behold, abstinence from speech have I vowed to the Most Gracious, hence I may not speak today to any mortal.'" See the similarity? God is treating the man exactly in the same manner as He is treating the woman. These two stories of Maryam and the birth of Jesus, and Zakarīya and the birth of Yahya, have some similarity in that they do not follow the conventional ways that normally take place, and with which we are familiar in our lives.

Zakarīya was a prophet from the Family of 'Imrān, a descendant of the Prophet Harūn,⁴⁷ who was the brother of Sayyidna Musa,⁴⁸ *alayhi-s-salam*. The Prophet Zakarīya was the chief of the temple of the Israelites at that time. All the servants in the temple, at that time, were competing with one another to be the sponsor of Maryam. So they resorted to something like a lottery, called in Arabic language, *qur'ah* where names are written on pieces of paper and somebody picks one of the papers and the one whose name is picked is the winner. According to some explanations of the Qur'an, they did not use paper at that time, but they used pins, and these pins would be thrown into the Jordan River. The pins would float in the water, and the pin that would stop would be the winner of the lottery. The name on the pin which stopped would be the one to sponsor Maryam. Every priest, serving in the temple, threw his pin, and all the pins floated with the water except the pin of Zakariya. It stopped. So Zakariya was selected to be the sponsor of Maryam. The Qur'an says [Imam quotes Arabic verse. The English translation is:]

"This account of something that was beyond the reach of thy perception We now reveal to thee (O Muhammad): for thou wert not with them when they drew

lots as to which of them should be Mary's sponsor, and thou wert not with them when they contended about it with one another" [3:44].

It means, Muhammad, We are revealing to you that story of Maryam to be an indication that this (Qur'an) is not your word or your information, but, it is the word of the Most Knower, who is revealing this information to you as you were not with them when they were contending as to who is going to sponsor Maryam.

[Transcriber's note: the following are additional Qur'anic verses, from Chapter 19, named after Maryam, where, also, the Qur'an talks about the Prophet Zakarīya and the birth of his son Yahya:]

"An account of the grace which thy Sustainer bestowed upon His servant Zakarīya: When he called out to his Sustainer in the secrecy of his heart, he prayed: "O my Sustainer! Feeble have become my bones, and my head glistens with grey hair. But never yet, O my Lord, has my prayer unto Thee remained unanswered. "Now, behold, I am afraid of what my kinsfolk will do after I am gone, for my wife has always been barren. Bestow, then, upon me, out of Thy grace, the gift of a successor who will be my heir as well as an heir to the dignity of the House of Jacob; and make him, O my Sustainer, well-pleasing to Thee!"

"Thereupon the angels called out to him: O Zakarīya! We bring thee the glad tidings of the birth of a son whose name shall be John. And God says 'Never have We given this name to anyone before him'. Zakariya exclaimed: "O my Sustainer! How can I have a son when my wife has always been barren and I have become utterly infirm through old age?" Answered the angel: "Thus it is"; but thy Sustainer says, 'This is easy for Me – even as I have created thee aforetime out of nothing.'" Zakarīya prayed: 'O my Sustainer! Appoint a sign for me!' Said the angel: "Thy sign shall be that for full three nights and days thou wilt not speak unto men'. Thereupon he came out of the sanctuary unto his people and signified to them by gestures: 'Extol His limitless glory by day and by night.'" And when the son was born and grew up, he was told: "O John! Hold fast unto the divine writ with all thy strength!" – for We granted him wisdom while he was yet a little boy, as well as, by Our grace, the gift of compassion and purity; and he was always conscious of Us and full of piety towards his parents; and never was he haughty or rebellious" [19: 2-12].

⁴⁷ Aaron

⁴⁸ The Prophet Moses, upon him be peace

Christmas and Jesus in The Context of Islam

Imam A. M. Khattab

[Part 3 of 5]

The Birth of Jesus and His Miracles

Kalimatullah: it is one of the titles of Jesus that can be inferred from the story in the Qur'an. The Qur'an says, "God gives you the glad tiding of *one word of His*." And if you listen to the evangelical broadcasters on television, they too, refer to Jesus as, "Kalimatullah Al-Maseeh." ⁴⁹ So, even in Christianity, they refer to Jesus as "The Word of God" or Kalimatullah.

What is Kalimatullah? Kalimatullah, as interpreted by the Muslim scholars, is not a "word" in the literal sense, but it means "The Will of God". It is the Will of God that a child will be born in a way that is different in nature from what is known to us. The only way known to us is as a result of sexual relations between a man and a woman. In the case of Jesus, this was not so, because Maryam⁵⁰ was not married. The Qur'an states that this child was born "pure" without a father and from what we call Maryam *al'adhraa'*.⁵¹ The Muslim scholars explain that "The Word of God" (or the *kalima*) is كُنْ which means, "Be!" It is an order of God. If God wills something to take place He will say, " 'Be,' and it is!" (كُنْ فَيَكُونُ). So the creation of Jesus came about by one

word from God – "Be." That is why Jesus is called *Kalimatullah*. [Imam quotes Arabic verses. The translation is:]

"Said Mary: 'O my Sustainer! How can I have a son when no man has ever touched me?' The angel answered: 'Thus it is: God creates what He wills: when He wills a thing to be, He but says unto it, 'Be' – and it is. And He will impart unto thy son revelation, and wisdom, and the Torah, and the Gospel, and will make him an apostle unto the children of Israel'" [3:47-49].

As a result of the extraordinary birth of Jesus, numerous arguments are rampant among the people. Some Christians say Jesus has no father, so God is his father or, as they say, Jesus is the Son of God. Some other Christians say no, God incarnated Himself as Jesus and came to earth, and that Jesus is God himself. To the Muslims, there is no difference between Jesus and any other human being. Jesus was a human being: he used to eat, drink, go to the toilet, and walk about everywhere like everybody else. The Muslims exalt and revere Maryam more than the Christians, because the Christians, in some of their writings, talk about Maryam being betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, a carpenter. Some Christian denominations say Jesus is the son of Joseph, the carpenter. That is what they say. But the Qur'an states that this child was born pure, without a father, from the Virgin Mary. And the word "virgin" in our terminology is different from the word "virgin" in the American dictionary. In the American

⁴⁹ Christ Jesus, the Word of God

⁵⁰ Mary

⁵¹ Mary, the Virgin

dictionary, a virgin woman is one who didn't marry. In our terminology, as Muslims, it has *nothing* to do with marriage. A virgin woman is one who has never been touched by a man. Imam quotes Arabic verses. The translation is:]

“And lo! The angels said: ‘O Mary! Behold, God has elected thee and made thee pure, and raised thee above all the women of the world. O Mary! Remain thou truly devout to thy Sustainer, and prostrate thyself in worship, and bow down with those who bow down before Him” [3:42-43].

“Lo! The angels said: ‘O Mary! Behold, God sends thee the glad tiding, through a word from Him, of a son who shall become known as *الْمَسِيحُ عِيسَى ابْنُ مَرْيَمَ*⁵² - of great honor in this world and in the life to come, and shall be of those who are drawn near unto God (*وَمِنَ الْمُقَرَّبِينَ*).

And he shall speak unto men in his cradle, and as a grown man, and shall be of the righteous” [3:45].

That Arabic word *Maseeh* is taken from the Hebrew word *mi-shī-hā* and it means *mubarak*, which means “blessed”. The true name of Jesus is ‘Isa, while *Maseeh* is his attribute or quality. ‘Isa Al-Maseeh means ‘Isa Al-Mubarak or Jesus, the Blessed. Whenever Al Maseeh or ‘Isa is mentioned in the Qur’an, it is invariably followed by *ibn Maryam*⁵³ and that is to abolish the idea of Jesus being the “Son of God” as some Christians say. The word Maryam also has a meaning: *al‘abida* – the worshipper. So Jesus is ‘Isa, the Blessed Son of the Worshipper.

When the angel gave Maryam the glad tiding of the son she was going to conceive, he also gave her some further descriptions of the child, namely, that he will be characterized by a distinction in this world and in the Hereafter. He will be very well known among his people, not only in this world but even in the Hereafter, and above all, he will be especially close to God. Based on this verse [3:45] some people say if Jesus is that close to God, then, maybe, his position is higher than that of Muhammad and Ibrahim and those other prophets and messengers. But the Qur’an says they are equal: “Say: ‘We believe in God, and in that which has been bestowed from on high upon us, and which has been bestowed upon Abraham and Ishmael and Isaac and Jacob and their descendants, and that which has been vouchsafed to Moses and Jesus, and that which

has been vouchsafed to all the other prophets by their Sustainer: we make no distinction between any of them. And it is unto Him that we surrender ourselves.”⁵⁴ Yet, the Muslims, especially in India and Pakistan, talk and do things that are in direct contradiction to this Qur’anic verse. When they read *mawlood sharif*,⁵⁵ they say that the Prophet Muhammad was created of *noor*,⁵⁶ and that this *noor* was transferred from Adam, to Idrees,⁵⁷ to this, to this, to this, until it reached Abdullah; then Abdullah married Amina and Muhammad was the result; but, originally, he was *noor*. All this has *nothing* to do with Islam. We go by the Qur’anic verse above: “We make no distinction between the prophets.”

In the terminology of Islam, the messengers are divided into two groups. Some of them are known as *Ulu ‘azmi min-ar-rusul* – the ones who struggled with ultimate strength for the sake of the call of God. In a way, at least in our evaluation or estimation as human beings, we think of them as the messengers who suffered more than the others, and that is why they are called ‘*Ulu-l-‘Azmi*. Included in this category are the Prophet Nuh,⁵⁸ Prophet Ibrahim,⁵⁹ Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad.

Christmas, the 25th of December, the occasion of the celebration of the birth of Jesus by the Christians, is a date agreed upon by mutual convention. The Orthodox Christians in the east celebrate Christmas on the 7th of January and that is a date *they* agreed upon among themselves. So, in actuality, there are two Christmases: one on the 25th of December and one on the 7th of January. And the reason is because nobody really knows when Jesus was born. The Christians believe that Jesus was born in a cave, and the Muslims believe that Jesus was born under a palm tree. You know, since Jesus was a Palestinian citizen, he could be a relative of Dr Mansoor.⁶⁰

Jesus is depicted in church imagery, here, as blonde,

⁵⁴ 2:136, 3:84

⁵⁵ A ceremony made on the occasion of the birthday of the Prophet Muhammad, by some Muslims, where they sing songs in praise of the Prophet.

⁵⁶ Light

⁵⁷ The Prophet Idrees mentioned in the Qur’an e.g. in 19:56

⁵⁸ Noah

⁵⁹ Abraham

⁶⁰ Dr. Mansoor is a pediatrician from Palestine, and one of the pioneers of the Islamic Center of Greater Toledo. He is possibly the oldest man in the audience. This unexpected remark by the Imam sent the audience into peals of laughter.

⁵² The Christ Jesus, son of Mary

⁵³ The son of Mary

with golden hair and rosy cheeks, and so on. Whenever I go to the churches and meet with my Christian friends, I always tell them, people, this is a deception; Jesus should look like me because he was born in the same area I come from. You could depict him that way if he was born in California. But he was not.

The story starts when Maryam left her house and went into isolation to worship Allah. And all those good people, including Muhammad, used to worship Allah according to the religion of Ibrahim. Muhammad was worshipping God according to the religion of Ibrahim in the cave of Hira⁶¹ when the Qur'an first began to be revealed to him. In the same way, while Mary was worshipping God according to the religion of Ibrahim, there appeared before her a young man in his full strength. She got scared. A woman, all alone, in the presence of a young man, very strong in appearance; so, she said to him: "Please, leave me alone. Keep away from me." *Fu*, "the man" said to her, "I have brought you news that you will have a baby." She was even more scared. How could this take place: "How can I have a child and no man ever touched me?" But he replied, your God says, "That is easy for Him, that is a matter which is decreed and decided; no argument about it." The Qur'an narrates that story in very fine language. Imam quotes the Arabic verses. The English translation is:]

"And call to mind, through this divine writ, Mary. Lo! She withdrew from her family to an eastern place and kept herself in seclusion (*hijāban*) from them, whereupon We sent unto her *Our Ruh*,⁶² who appeared to her in the shape of a handsome, strong man. She exclaimed: 'Verily, I seek refuge from thee with the Most Gracious! Approach me not if thou art conscious of Him.' The angel answered: 'I am but a messenger of thy Sustainer, who says 'I shall bestow upon thee the gift of a son endowed with purity.' She said: 'How can I have a son when no man has ever touched me? – for never have I been unchaste.' The angel answered: 'Thus it is; but thy Sustainer says, 'This is easy for Me; and thou shalt have a son, so that We might make him a symbol unto mankind and an act of grace from Us.' And it was a thing decreed by God: and in time she conceived him, and then she withdrew with him to a far-off place" [19:16-22].

We find that the ulama⁶³ of Islam sometimes argue with each other about the meaning of a Qur'anic verse. Maryam is saying, "How can I have a son when no man has ever touched me?" What is the meaning of "touched me" here? In this context, it means, "slept with me". That is a point on which Imam Abu Haneefah and Imam Shafi'i⁶⁴ differed. Imam Abu Haneefah said if you shake hands with a woman while you have your wudu'⁶⁵ it will not spoil your wudu'. Imam Shafi'i said, no, if you shake hands with a woman you have to re-do your wudu'. The argument of Abu Haneefah is based upon the above verse where "to touch" means "to sleep with". See the variation? See how the Qur'an is variously interpreted and you will never reach any final decision because it is a challenge to the human mind. So it is left for the Muslims to follow the way they like: the way of Imam Abu Haneefah, or of Imam Shafi'i; to follow the way which will suit their religiosity. But, nowadays, we are living in a mess: when somebody delivers a sermon he feels that he is saying the truth and anything other than what he says is not right, and if you don't follow him then you are his enemy. But our former ulama argued, and everyone made up his mind and interpreted a Qur'anic verse and explained it, and said "*Wā-Allahu A'lam*,⁶⁶ this is my opinion; if you find one better than mine, follow it." This is called *al yusr bil Islam* which means take "the easy from Islam" – take whatever suits your religiosity. The two opinions are right and you follow the one which is easy for you. And, may be, what is easy for you today will not be easy tomorrow.

That is one Qur'anic verse which made some work for the former ulama who established the schools of thought in Islam.

The Qur'an goes on to say that Maryam became pregnant with him (*fa hamalathu*). For how many months? Nobody knows. Was the pregnancy a full pregnancy of nine months, as we know it? God knows. Was the pregnancy for one week, or one hour, or one day, or long or short, nobody knows. So we don't interfere in something which is not our business. All the Qur'an says after "hamalathu" is that "She went away." She did not like to show herself in her state of

⁶¹ A few miles outside the city of Makkah where Muhammad lived

⁶² The angel of revelation – Gabriel

⁶³ Scholars

⁶⁴ Founders of the Hanafi and Shafi'i Schools of Thought in Islam, respectively

⁶⁵ Mandatory ablutions prior to entering into ritualistic prayer, offered five times every day by Muslims

⁶⁶ And God knows best

pregnancy to her people.

The pangs of delivery came to her while she was under a palm tree. [Imam quotes Arabic verses. The translation is:]

“... ‘Oh, would that I had died ere this, and become a thing forgotten, utterly forgotten!’ Thereupon a voice called out to her from beneath that palm tree: ‘Grieve not! Thy Sustainer has provided a rivulet running beneath thee; and shake the trunk of the palm-tree towards thee. Eat then, and drink, and let thine eye be gladdened! And if thou shouldst see any human being, convey this unto him: ‘Behold, abstinence (*sawm*) from talking have I vowed unto the Most Gracious; hence I may not speak today to any mortal’” [19:23-26].

Who is the speaker that calls out to Maryam telling her not to grieve? There are two opinions in the tafsirs.⁶⁷ One is that the Angel Jibreel,⁶⁸ whom the Christians call the Holy Spirit, called upon her from under the palm tree, and the other opinion is that Jesus, the infant, said it. If you have heard Shaykh Abdul Basit, one of the well-known *qarees*⁶⁹ recite the Qur’ān, he will read that verse one time: **فَنَادَاهَا مِن تَحْتِهَا**

– “*Min*” **تَحْتِهَا** – then he will re-read it the second time

تَحْتِهَا *Man* . **مِنْ تَحْتِهَا** makes the pronoun related to Jesus, as if Jesus spoke to his mother, whereas the former reading relates the pronoun to the Angel Jibreel.⁷⁰

There were seven tribes in Arabia at the time of the Prophet and each one would read and pronounce the Qur’an according to their own dialect, and it was this practice which gave rise to instances such as the one quoted above. To stop this, the Prophet, peace be upon him, said that the Qur’an was revealed in the language of the tribe of Quraysh and it should be read and pronounced in that dialect only.

Here is a very good lesson: God says to Maryam shake the trunk of the tree; ripe dates will fall upon you to eat. You know, our brothers, nowadays, who sit in the mosque praying *nafl*,⁷¹ and when they finish the *nafl* they pray

Tahajjud,⁷² finish *Tahajjud* then make *i’tikāf*,⁷³ and all that business. And when you ask them how they make their living so they can spend a few dollars on their wives or kids, they say, “*Allahu huwar-razaaq.*”⁷⁴ *Khalaas!*⁷⁵ Sayyidna Dāwūd⁷⁶ said, “Let not any of you stop working and just sit, and pray to God to provide for him, because he should know that the sky will not shower gold or silver.” We gain an insight into this saying of Sayyidna Dāwūd from the condition of Maryam – a woman who has just been through the harrowing process of delivering a child, and the order to her was, “Shake the trunk of the tree”. It means *work* to eat. It means that you have to work to live. That is the teaching of Islam. Shake the trunk of the tree so dates will fall upon you; if you don’t shake it, no food. This is *sabab wa musabbab*, known in scientific terms as cause and effect. So Maryam, even in that difficult time of hers, had to work to eat. Nowadays, there are Muslims in Toledo and Detroit who divorce their wives on paper in order to receive welfare. We, the Muslims, are very well versed in the laws of America, even before we set out from the old country; we know them better than President Bill Clinton. Notice, while we are talking about Jesus and his birth, we are branching into other areas. This is because *every word* in the Qur’an is a prescription or a proscription. Here it exhorts us to *work*.

The Christians say Jesus was born in a cave. But the Qur’an reveals that he was born under a palm tree. The palm trees in those areas bear fruit in late summer – around late August and September. It would have been more appropriate if the selected and agreed upon date, for Christmas, was in August or September because it would have been closer to the event.

Maryam returned to her people with her baby. They questioned her. She had anticipated that this would take place: “When they tell me, ‘*yu* Maryam, you are the servant of the temple! You are the priest! From where did you get that baby? What will I say? What am I going to tell the people?’” God

time of the day or night

⁷² Also supererogatory prayer that is offered only between midnight and dawn

⁷³ Staying in the mosque ALL NIGHT for the purpose of worshipping God

⁷⁴ “God will provide for them!”

⁷⁵ An Arabic expression meaning “Finished!”, “That’s it!” “Enough!” “It is understood. Needs no further argument” depending on the context.

⁷⁶ The Prophet David

⁶⁷ Qur’anic exegesis

⁶⁸ Gabriel

⁶⁹ Professional reciters of the Qur’ān

⁷⁰ The difference is that “*Min*” represents the vowel “e”, whereas “*Man*” represents the vowel “a”. A difference in accent, or dialect, can confuse an “e” for an “a”, and vice versa

⁷¹ Voluntary or supererogatory prayers that can be offered at any

gave her the *same* advice that He gave Zakariya: “If you see any human beings, signal to them: ‘I have vowed fasting to Allah, the Beneficent. I’m not going to talk to any human being today.’” Her people questioned her and said: “You are not married, your father was a good man, your mother was a good woman, and you got that baby, so you are unchaste.” In response to the accusation, Maryam pointed to the baby, in effect, saying, “talk to him”, the baby in her arms. They said, “Are you making fun of us? How can we talk to an infant who is still in the cradle?”

God made Jesus “an ayat”⁷⁷ of His power, that He created a man with no father. How were the people going to believe that Jesus was born in a miraculous way, without a father, and that he was the messenger of God coming to guide their lives? God gave him some signs whereby to prove to the people that he was a prophet and messenger of God, and was supported by the Divine power. Those signs are the miracles of Jesus. A miracle, in Islamic terminology, is called *mu’jizah*, which means to do something beyond the ability of a normal human being; the normal human being cannot do it. So when a miracle comes through one who claims that he is the prophet or messenger of Allah, then, that indicates truly that there must be a hotline between that man and God in order for him to do such a thing. The first miracle of Jesus was to talk to people in very fluent language while he was a baby – an infant – still in his cradle. So Maryam pointed to the baby as much as to say, “Ask him for the answers to all your questions.” God had already revealed to Mary that her son would talk to the people in his infancy, and as a grown man. And there is a difference between the two kinds of talk: the first talk is the true indication of a miracle. Jesus looked at them and said, [Imam quotes Arabic verses. The translation is:]

“I am the slave of God (*inni ‘abdullah*). He gave me the book (*آتَانِي الْكِتَابَ*). And He made me a prophet. And He recommended me to establish prayer and to pay zakat⁷⁸ as long as I live. He recommended me to be good to my mother. He did not make me overbearing or *dhālim*. Peace be upon me the day I was born, the day I am going to die, and the day I am going to be resurrected for questioning on the Day of Judgment” [19:30-33].

Talk from a baby! Puzzling! Surprised them. That is

called a miracle, indicating that this boy who was born with no father is a true [not an imposter] messenger. However, stubborn people, who see a white wall in front of them and insist it is black, continue to disbelieve. And here, also, is a piece of evidence to refute the divinity of Jesus: He says “Peace be upon me the day I was born, the day I am going to die and the day I am going to be resurrected and questioned.” These are exactly the qualities of human beings not someone who is Divine.

In these Qur’anic verses, there are things to be read between the lines. Jesus started his talk by *inni ‘abdullah* – I am the slave of God. He did not say, “I am God”. He did not say, “I am the Son of God”. It is plain and clear: *inni ‘abdullah* – I am a slave of God – like anyone of you. Nowadays, you hear about, or come across churches called “Church of the Mother of God.” This idea of “Mother of God” and “Son of God” is penetrating through their faith, and killing it from the root, while our Qur’an says, [Imam quotes Chapter 112, *Al-Ikhlās*.⁷⁹ The English translation is:]

“Say: ‘He is the One God: God the Eternal, the Uncaused Cause of All That Exists. He begets not, and neither is He begotten; and there is nothing that could be compared with Him.’”

آتَانِي الْكِتَابَ (He gave me the Book). He means the Bible. Was the Bible given to him? It was not given to him; he is a little baby. But here the Arabic grammar plays its role. The sentence is put in the past tense: “He *gave* me the Book.” But he was not given the Book yet. In Arabic grammar, when you use the past tense, in place of the present tense, it means that this matter *will* happen: there is *no doubt* that it will happen. So it means that he *will* be given the Book *for sure*.

A Qur’anic verse like that⁸⁰ is found in *Surat An-Nahl*.⁸¹ It starts by *آتَى أَمْرُ اللَّهِ فَلَا تَسْتَعْجِلُوهُ*. *آتَى* means “came” – past tense. The literal meaning is, “The Day of Judgment already came.” But, it didn’t come yet. It means to say that *for sure* it is coming at a certain time. That is why the expression came in the past tense, but that becomes clear from

⁷⁹ “The Declaration of God’s Perfection”

⁸⁰ Containing the use of the past tense. Imam starts talking with extreme urgency in his voice

⁸¹ Chapter 16 in the Qur’an

⁷⁷ A sign or symbol

⁷⁸ The obligatory poor-due (2.5% of net income)

the following phrase: **فَلَا تَسْتَعْجِلُوهُ** (so don't rush it); the order of God, the Day of Judgment, has taken place, *don't* rush it. It appears contradictory, but it means, "The order of God, the Day of Judgment, *is coming*, there is *no doubt* in that. "Don't rush it", means, "wait, wait for it." That is an example of the unique Qur'anic language.

Coming back to the story of Jesus, the Qur'anic verses go on to elaborate what will be the personality of that fatherless son, what will be the task he will perform during his life, and what type of attributes he is going to have, and what type of miracles he is going to be supported with. [Imam quotes Arabic verses. The English translation is:]

"And He will impart unto thy son revelation (*al kitab*), and wisdom (*al hikmah*), and the Torah (the revelation of Moses) and the Gospel (*al Injeel*/the Bible), and will make him an apostle unto the children of Israel" [3:48, 49].

The first thing mentioned is that God will teach him *al kitab*.⁸² *Al kitab*, here, is interpreted by some scholars as "The Bible" – the word of God – which will be given to him. But some of the Muslim scholars understand the word "al-kitab" here from another angle. They say it means that God will teach him how to write, because the Bible or *Al Injeel* is mentioned separately later on.

Next, God will teach him *al-hikmah*.⁸³ What is *hikmah*? In our countries, they call the doctor "hakeem": I went to the hakeem today because I felt pain somewhere. In the Urdu language, the word "hakeem" also means someone who cures you. No matter if he has a degree from the school of medicine, or not, they call him hakeem. So what is *al-hikmah*? It is a sort of customization. *Hikmah* and hakeem have the same root meaning – to make a sound and educated judgment. A hakeem is one who will not treat all people in the same way, but he treats everyone according to his needs. He diagnoses each person's disease, and then he prescribes medicine which will cure that disease; he doesn't give all the patients the same medicine otherwise the medicine could kill them. This is called *hikmah*. Nowadays we utilize that term "al-hikmah" only in certain fields as, for example, in Medicine, but in reality the term *al-hikmah* pertains to the method of *teaching another person*. As Muslims, we don't utilize the *hikmah* when we are preaching; it is what we lack nowadays. If we utilized *hikmah*,

we would have to diagnose every community, and then prescribe to each the relevant type of *hikmah* – the type of words which we transmit to them – otherwise it will not be *hikmah*. The type of preaching suitable for Africa is not suitable for America, and if we do not discriminate between the two methods, then it will not be *hikmah*.

"He will teach him *At-Torah*." *At-Torah* is known among the Christians as the Old Testament. It is the book, or the word of God, revealed to Moses, *alayhi-s-salam*.⁸⁴ The Qur'an mentions five books that the Muslims are required to believe in: *At-Torah*, revealed to Moses; *Al-Injeel* or the Bible which is the word of God, revealed to Jesus; *Al-Qur'an*, revealed to Muhammad; *Az-Zabur* which is the word of God revealed to the Prophet David; and the *Scrolls* of Ibrāhīm mentioned in Chapter Al-'Ala.⁸⁵

Jesus was taught, and he accepted the Torah which is the revelation of Moses – the book of the Jews. The Jews said that since Jesus is preaching the Torah, it means that Jesus is a Jew, and they started to use it politically. They have never said Yasir Arafat⁸⁶ is a Jew – although he *is* a Jew; he is a believer in the Torah, and he is a believer in the Bible, also. Every Muslim is a believer in the Torah and the Bible. So, if we use that logic of the Jews, then it means every Muslim is a Christian, and every Muslim is a Jew. That shows how close the three monotheistic religions are.

Jesus said to the people that he had come with certain signs from their God. One of those signs was that he could shape a piece of clay in the form of a bird, then blow into it, and it would turn into a living bird, **بِإِذْنِ اللَّهِ** – *By the leave of God*. This is one of the miracles of Jesus mentioned in the Qur'an, and some of our Christian friends take this miracle as a proof that Jesus is God, or Son of God. When you sit with the Christians, nowadays, and discuss with them the "divinity" of Jesus, and when you tell them that he is not the Son of God, but that he is the son of Mary, then, the first question they will ask you is: "Do you Muslims believe that Jesus used to shape the clay in the form of a bird and breathe into it and make it come alive?" We say, yes. "Then", they reply, "who can give life except God?" Then some of us, who are not well grounded in the Qur'an, are perplexed, and don't know what to answer.

⁸² Literally, The Book

⁸³ Wisdom

⁸⁴ Upon him be peace

⁸⁵ Chapter 87 of the Qur'an

⁸⁶ The leader of the Palestinian Liberation Organization [PLO]

But, there is another similar example in the Qur'an: that of Sayyidna Ibrahim.⁸⁷ Abraham said to God, "Show me how you give life to the dead." God said to him, "You don't believe?" Abraham said, "I do, but I want to assure myself." God told him to get some birds, cut them into pieces, put the pieces on the surrounding mountains, then call upon the birds, and they will come to him, flying.⁸⁸ So, in this context, we could say Ibrahim gave life to the dead but only "with the permission of God." There is a similarity in this respect between Jesus and Ibrahim, so why don't we say Ibrahim is divine, or he is God, or the Son of God? He was simply a prophet, just like Jesus, and both of them performed these miracles but only with the permission of God. And Moses, when God commanded him to throw the staff in his right hand, it turned into a snake running and moving. Moses got scared of it. But God told him to take a hold of it, and not to be scared, for He shall restore it to its former state. That was one of the miracles God gave to Moses. And we can take this as an example, also: isn't it that, "with the permission of God," Moses turned the dead stick into a living snake?

Now, when someone argues with you and tells you that since your Qur'an acknowledges that Jesus gave life to the dead, and since this is an attribute of God only, therefore, Jesus must be God, then you can tell them that if this is applicable to Jesus, then it should be applicable to Moses and Abraham as well, since Jesus was not alone in displaying miracles that make some people argue that he had the attributes and the power of God, therefore, he is God. The fact that Jesus used to give life to the dead was just one of his miracles, just as the snake and the birds were miracles for Moses and Ibrahim respectively.

The other signs that Jesus came with were that he cured the lepers, he cured the blind, and he could tell the people exactly what they stored in their houses, and what they ate in their houses, "by the permission of God", and he said to them: in this [in my ability to tell you what you eat or store in your houses, in my ability to tell you what is "unseen"] there is a sign for you indicating the Divinity of the One who sent me to you, if you are truly believers. He advised the Children of Israel that he had come to confirm the Torah which was revealed before him to Moses, and also to make legitimate for them some things which were prohibited before. And, to refute completely the idea that he was the son of God, he

finalized his talk by saying: "God is my God and your God and let us follow this straight way." [Imam quotes Arabic verses. The English translation is:]

"And thy Sustainer will teach him the Book and Wisdom, the Law and the Gospel, and appoint him a messenger to the Children of Israel, with this message: 'I have come to you, with a Sign from your Lord, in that I make for you out of clay, as it were, the figure of a bird, and breathe into it, and it becomes a bird by God's leave: And I heal those born blind, and the lepers, and I quicken the dead, by God's leave; and I declare to you what ye eat, and what ye store in your houses. Behold, in all this there is indeed a message for you, if you are truly believers; and I have come to confirm the truth of whatever there still remains of the Torah, and to make lawful unto you some of the things which aforetime were forbidden to you. And I have come unto you with a message from your Sustainer; remain, then, conscious of God, and pay heed unto me. Verily, God is my Sustainer as well as your Sustainer; so worship Him alone: this is a straight way' [3:48-51].

Here, I would like to make a point. Among the Muslims there are some who fall into the same error as the Christians: when they talk about Muhammad, sometimes, they raise him to a very high status, to the extent that it goes beyond what the Qur'an has accorded him. Sometimes we describe Muhammad as *ashraful anbiya* meaning "the best of the messengers" while the Qur'an says to us "Don't make a distinction between one messenger and the other; they are equal." And we also say about Muhammad that he will be above all the prophets and messengers on the Day of Judgment. That is also going outside what the Qur'an says, because Muhammad himself was instructed, through the Qur'an, to say, "I am a man like you"; this was so his followers will not think of him as a divine being, but as a human being who is susceptible to error like any other human being. For example, when we consider the household of the Prophet, we are apt to think that it would be a house with no problems at all. No! It was *full* of problems. His wives, everyone was plotting against the other, and they were divided into political parties – *in the house of the Prophet!* If you would like to know more about that, read Chapter At-Tahrim.⁸⁹ His wives used to tell him things to make him angry at the other party, and Qur'anic verses were revealed to threaten all of them: "It is

⁸⁷ The Prophet Abraham

⁸⁸ 2:260

⁸⁹ Chapter 66 of the Qur'an

possible that if he divorces you, God will give him better wives than you." All this shows that Muhammad was a man, a human being, like any other human being, so the Muslims will not fall into the same mistake of giving him a divine status, as the Christians did with Jesus. The Qur'anic verse says, "Say thou, O Muhammad: 'I am but a mortal like you. The only distinction between you and me is that I received revelation that your God is one God'" and "The noblest and the most honored one of you in the sight of God is he who is the most righteous and most deeply conscious of Him."⁹⁰ So, the criterion by which to judge the closeness of a human being to God is his or her actions and deeds during life, not by being followers of Muhammad.

In Christianity, there are many differences between the various denominations regarding their view of the nature and position of Jesus. Some Christians believe that Jesus is the Son of God and because he had no human father, so God is his father. Other Christians believe that Jesus came down to earth in the form of a human being, but that, in fact, he is God himself. Still other Christians believe in the Trinity (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) and they say that the three together form one God. In Islamic philosophy, there is a very big debate about this concept because, if the Father and Son and Holy Spirit form one whole, then it means that each one of those is only a part and not a whole, and it is impossible for God to be a fraction. A part cannot function by itself; it needs the rest of the parts to function. This concept is hotly debated from the scientific point of view as well. Some Christians believe that Joseph, the carpenter, was interested in marrying Maryam and that Jesus is the son of Joseph, the carpenter. They all profess to be Christians but see how every faction has a different belief? There is one other group of Christians who believe that Jesus was a human being and a messenger of God, and that he is neither the Son of God, nor God himself.

About a month ago⁹¹ a very prominent priest in Toronto, Canada, gave a sermon and talked about Jesus as the Prophet of God. He said to his congregation that Jesus is not God; he is not the Son of God; he was a *human being* like me and you. He used to eat and drink, and talk to the people, just like us. And there is a *revolution* now in the Church in Canada against that priest. Everyone, every Church is against his statement, and the newspapers in Toronto wrote about him,

and even locally, *The Blade*,⁹² wrote about the turmoil last week in the city of Toronto and in Canada. It has forced the people to wake up and think, because, as we are in the age of computers, it's very hard to find even a little laptop computer that will display 1 for this summation: $1+1+1 = 3$. It will never happen! Yet, some human beings still believe in this. In the Qur'an, whenever the name of Jesus ('Isa) is mentioned, you will find *always* "son of Mary" suffixed to it – *always*. In *Surat Maryam*⁹³ the Qur'an talks about how a child can be born without a father. And when this was puzzling to some people, more Qur'anic verses were revealed to say that if you are surprised for a child to be born with no father, then consider Adam, who had no father *or* mother. In our understanding as human beings, if God could create a man from no father *or* mother, then, the creation of a child from a mother only would be easier. That is the analogy. The power of God has no limit, but since the Qur'an is talking to a human mind, God says: [Imam quotes Arabic verse. The English translation is:]

"Verily, in the sight of God, the nature of Jesus is as the nature of Adam, whom He created out of dust, and then said unto him, "Be" – and he is. This is the truth from thy Sustainer; be not, then, among the doubters!"⁹⁴ But, nobody, not even the Christians, call Adam God, or the Son of God.

[Transcriber's note: the following is a translation of additional Qur'anic verses that are pertinent to the subject at hand:]

"And thus it was that Jesus always said: "Verily, God is my Sustainer as well as your Sustainer; so worship none but Him: this alone is the straight way. And yet, the sects that follow the Bible are at variance among themselves about the nature of Jesus! [19:36]

"O followers of the Gospel! Do not overstep the bounds of truth in your religious beliefs, and do not say of God anything but the truth. The Christ Jesus, son of Mary, was but God's Apostle – the fulfillment of His promise which He had conveyed unto Mary – and a soul created by Him. Believe, then, in God and His apostles, and do not say, "God is a Trinity." Desist from this assertion for your own good. God is but one God; utterly remote is He, in His glory, from having a son. . . Never did the Christ feel too proud to be God's servant. . . ." [4: 171-172].

⁹⁰ 49:13

⁹¹ Around Nov./Dec 1997

⁹² The daily Toledo newspaper

⁹³ Chapter 19 of the Qur'an

⁹⁴ 3: 59

Christmas and Jesus in The Context of Islam

Imam A. M. Khattab

[Part 4 of 5]

The Original Sin (*Al khatee'ah-al Ūlā*)

The Qur'an states: "No bearer of burdens will bear the burdens of another." This concept is very easy to understand for those of us living in this country. If I am driving my car in the street and I kill a human being, what will the police do? Will they arrest me, or my son? Ask any Christian this question and they will answer, "You". Why not my son? And they reply, "Because he did not commit the crime." So, if Adam committed a crime⁹⁵ why is the logic turned upside down? It is as simple as that. The justice of this earth does not hold my son responsible for my crime because that would be a gross injustice. So how can the perfect justice of Heaven hold the *children* of Adam and Eve responsible for the "sin of Adam"? Logically, it is not acceptable. The sin is not transferable. Adam and Eve are long gone from the scene and their children cannot be blamed for their sin. The idea of transferring the blame for the Original Sin is completely refuted in Islam.

According to the Christians, every child is born with the sin of Adam because he inherited it from his father, who

inherited it from his father, and so on, up to Adam. So the sin is transferred from the father to the child. That is not so in Islam: each child is born like a blank page, *completely free of sin*; and, during the period of childhood, children are deemed free of committing sins. When the child reaches maturity or adulthood, then the person becomes responsible, and is held accountable for his/her deeds before God. The Original Sin⁹⁶ is mentioned in the Qur'an. It is a sin committed by Adam and Eve *together* and that, too, is at variance with the Christian belief. The Christians believe that Adam committed the sin after Eve tempted him.

The Qur'an states: "We said to Adam, live, you and your wife, in this Heaven but don't eat from that tree..." The *ulama*⁹⁷ from every religion have delved into this and have poked their nose into things, about which they have no knowledge. What is that tree? In some books of tafseer it is said to be an apple tree and I don't know why they selected that specifically. Another tafseer says it is the "zucchini tree" or

⁹⁵ "The Original Sin" according to Christianity

⁹⁶ "Eating from the forbidden tree"

⁹⁷ Scholars

“pumpkin tree”.⁹⁸ According to some Christians, it is not a tree *per se*, but it means the temptation of Eve by the devil – *the devil slept with Eve* – that’s the idea according to a certain sect of Christianity. While there are entire books written about this subject, there is no authentic opinion on what that tree is, and whether it is a literal tree or a metaphorical tree. For us Muslims, who are trying to stay clear of that problem, we believe that God ordered Adam to do something and he disobeyed. We should not engage in conjecture about what that tree is because there are no details mentioned. It could be a symbol of obedience and disobedience.

A lot of people believe that Eve was the one who tempted Adam to eat from the tree and, thus, she was responsible for the fall of Adam. This is a Christian interpretation of the faith, but, I’m sorry to say, our Muslim interpreters and commentators of the Qur’an have quoted these things from their books, and you find this account in some tafseers also, whereas the Qur’an completely refutes that idea.

The Arabic language has three grammatical cases: singular, dual, and plural, as opposed to singular and plural, in all other languages. Therefore, two persons, in the Arabic language, are not referred to in the plural form but in the *dual* form. And when the Qur’an talks about the story of Adam and Eve, it uses the dual form throughout. The Qur’an states: “O Adam, dwell thou and thy wife in this garden and eat (both of you) *fa kulaa*. . . Do not approach this one tree *la taqraba*

. . . Satan whispered unto the two *fa waswasa lahumaa*. . . Both of them ate from the tree *fa akalaa minha*. . .” So it talks about the two as equal sinners, neither one of them lured the other. They repented and God forgave the two *fa taba ‘alayhimaa*. It means it is not the fault of Eve alone, it is not the fault of Adam alone, but it is the fault of both of them: the sin is the sin of the two human beings, not the sin of a male or female.

The Christians say that Jesus was killed and crucified to cleanse them of this Original Sin, and thus, they are saved. But this is one of the essential principles which distinguishes Islam from Christianity: in Islam, we believe, as the Qur’an states: [Imam quotes several verses in Arabic. The English translation is:]

“O Men! Be conscious of your Sustainer, and stand in awe of the Day when no father will be of benefit for his son, and no son will be of benefit for his father! Verily, God’s promise of resurrection is true indeed: let not, then, the life of this world delude you, and let not your own deceptive thoughts about God delude you!” [31:33]

“Every soul draws the meed of its acts on none but itself: no bearer of burdens can bear the burden of another” [6:164].

“That no bearer of burdens shall be made to bear another’s burden; and that nought shall be accounted unto man but what he is striving for; and that in time the nature of all his striving will be shown to him in its true light, whereupon he shall be requited for it with the fullest requital” [53:38-40].

⁹⁸ Although, according to the botanical classification, neither of these are trees; they are vines.

⁹⁹ For example, the self-deluding expectation, while deliberately committing a sin, that God will forgive it (Asad).

Christmas and Jesus in The Context of Islam

Imam A. M. Khattab

[Part 5 of 5]

The Crucifixion

Do you know what Easter is? [Somebody from the audience says:]

“The birth of Jesus, peace be upon him.”

[Imam responds:] No. That is in December, as has been agreed upon. According to Christian belief, Jesus was killed, but after three days he rose from the dead. The Bibles say that Mary Magdalene went to his grave and found that it was open and his body was not there. The Christians believe that Jesus was killed and crucified on a Friday, he then rose from death on Sunday, and that Sunday is referred to as Easter. Today¹⁰⁰ is Easter Sunday, and the Friday before Easter Sunday is called, here, in America, Good Friday. And I don't know what's good about it; in our countries¹⁰¹ the Christians call it *Al Jumu'ah al-hazzenah* – the Sad Friday.

Islam categorically refutes the idea that Jesus was killed. And, therefore, the idea of Easter is, in turn, rejected. It does not exist in Islam.

I always watch the evangelists on television and their

style of preaching, because, maybe I'll learn something from them. This morning, if any of you woke up and were not late because of the time change from standard time to daylight savings time, and watched the TV, you would have heard the evangelists say: “Jesus was risen to his Father and sat on His right hand.” So, they say that after being killed on Friday, he was buried in his grave, and when Mary Magdalene went to the grave on Sunday, she found that it was open and there was no body in it. They did not find him, so, they say, he rose and went up to his Father.

We, as Muslims, ask the question: Does God have a hand? If He has a hand, He will be similar to us; He will be similar to His creation. And, as a result, why should we worship Him since He is like us? The idea of the “right hand of God” also is not acceptable in Islam. We find in the Qur'an some similar verses such as, [and Imam quotes Arabic verse]. This verse, if we translate it literally, means, “The hand of God is above their hand.” [The English translation of this verse is:]

“Behold, all who pledge their allegiance to thee”¹⁰²

¹⁰⁰ April 3, 1994

¹⁰¹ The Middle East

¹⁰² Muhammad

pledge their allegiance to God: the hand of God is over their hands. Hence, he who breaks his oath, breaks it only to his own hurt; whereas he who remains true to what he has pledged unto God, on him will He bestow a reward supreme.”¹⁰³ But the expression is used metaphorically and the Qur’anic verse is not understood in its literal meaning. With the hand, a person achieves, accomplishes, and brings to fruition all things, so it is indicative of his power. Similarly, in the Qur’anic verse which says, “The hand of God is over their hand” it means, “The power of God is above their power.” But in Christianity “Jesus was risen to his Father and sat on His right hand” is understood literally: that Jesus went up to God and sat on His right hand.

The Qur’an mentions the name of Jesus 33 times, while the name of Muhammad is mentioned four times in the Qur’an. It shows what the position of Jesus is in Islam, how important Jesus is to Muslims, and it shows us what our attitude should be towards him. Brother Jimmy Swaggart¹⁰⁴ said one time, “I feel sorry for the Muslims because they don’t believe that Jesus is a Savior. They don’t accept him in their hearts. So, they are not saved; they will go to hell.” That’s how he looks at it. But they forget that when we compare what the Qur’an says about Jesus with what the Bible says about Jesus, there is a big difference. That comparison shows which faith reveres Jesus more and holds him in higher esteem. It is the Muslims, not the Christians. The Bible states that Jesus “was humiliated, he was killed, he was nailed on the cross and, and . . .” The Muslims say no, stop it; he is above all that, he is supported by the Divine power; when his enemies tried to kill him, God saved him.

The Qur’an says about Jesus: “They¹⁰⁵ refuse to acknowledge the truth, and they utter an awesome calumny against Maryam¹⁰⁶ and they boast, ‘Behold, we have slain the Christ Jesus, son of Mary, the apostle of God.’ However, they did not slay him, and neither did they crucify him, but it only seemed to them as if it had been so; and, verily, those who hold conflicting views thereon are indeed confused, having no real knowledge thereof, and following mere conjecture. For, of a certainty, they did not slay him: nay, God exalted him unto Himself. . .” That is the account in the Qur’an. And the Bible, on the other

hand, says, Jesus was “driven to the cross, humiliated, like a lamb driven to the slaughterhouse.” That’s the language of the Bible – the literal words: “When Jesus was driven to the cross, humiliated, like a lamb driven to the slaughterhouse” while the Qur’an is saying no, “They killed him not, they crucified him not, it is a matter in their own imagination, and *rafu’hu Allahu ilayhi*.¹⁰⁷ And God is the most wise, the most powerful.” When you compare these verses of the Qur’an with the language of the Bible, then you know who holds Jesus in higher esteem. That word *humiliated*. . .¹⁰⁸

The life of every messenger of God was in danger at one time or the other, but God saved all of His chosen messengers. Nūh¹⁰⁹ – God saved him in the Ark. Nūh was saved – not humiliated. Abraham – God saved him from the fire. When he broke the idols, and the people, to avenge the destruction of their idols, threw him in the fire, the order came from Heaven “O fire, be cool and peace for Ibrahim.” So God saved him – he was not humiliated. Moses – God saved him from Pharaoh when he struck the sea with his stick – a miracle, which opened for him a road in the sea so he was saved, not humiliated, before Pharaoh. Muhammad – his people plotted to kill him. The Qurayshites had a meeting to discuss how to get rid of Muhammad. Someone suggested, “Kill him; chop his head off.” But the Arabs had a form of tribal retaliation that was sacred to them, so they feared a severe retaliation from Muhammad’s tribe if they were to kill him. Someone else suggested banishing him into the desert for good. But they had grave doubts regarding exile, because he could survive and come back. Someone else came up with a very clever idea: they would select a very strong young man from every tribe and they would stand outside the door of the house of Muhammad, and when he stepped out for Fajr prayer,¹¹⁰ they would all strike him over his head simultaneously with their swords. In this way Muhammad’s tribe could not retaliate against *all* the tribes because they had acted collectively in killing him. They decided this plan was the best. They chose a strong young man from every tribe and they went to his house. We know from history that he asked

¹⁰³ 48:10

¹⁰⁴ The Christian televangelist from Louisiana

¹⁰⁵ The Jews

¹⁰⁶ That Jesus was conceived as a result of adultery

¹⁰⁷ God raised him up unto Himself

¹⁰⁸ Imam has such a pained expression on his face and could not finish his sentence

¹⁰⁹ The Prophet Noah

¹¹⁰ At dawn

The Crucifixion

Ali to sleep in his bed that night.¹¹¹ [Imam quotes Arabic verse. The English translation is:]

“And remember, O Muhammad, how those who were bent on denying the truth were scheming against thee, in order to restrain thee from preaching, or to slay thee, or to drive thee away: thus have they always schemed: but God brought their scheming to naught – for God is above all schemers” [8: 30].

And exactly the same words are used in the Qur’an when referring to Jesus: [Imam quotes Arabic verse. The English translation is:] “And the unbelievers¹¹² schemed against Jesus; but God brought their scheming to naught: for God is above all schemers” [3: 54].

God inspired Muhammad to emigrate, at night, from Makkah to Madinah. He was saved. He was not killed or humiliated. No Messenger before Jesus, at least of those whom we call *’Ulū-l-’Azm* was killed in this way. Why should Jesus alone be killed? This would be injustice. Can we say God is unjust? He saved some of His messengers, and left others?

The Christians say, “Jesus is our Savior”: he was crucified and died for the sins of his followers, so they are now forgiven. So, Jesus suffered and was crucified and nailed on the cross so that the sins of the drunkards and murderers that we have nowadays can be forgiven? We have an Arabic proverb, “If you don’t have a thing you cannot give a thing.” How can Jesus save them if he could not save himself from his killers?

The crucifixion is emphatically rejected by the Qur’an. And there is another point here. The Qur’an declares that the *Jews* were talking blasphemously about Maryam and they were claiming that they killed Jesus. It was written like that in the Bible also. Until thirty years ago, it was known among the Christians that the Jews killed and crucified Jesus, and this has been the cause of a lot of enmity and acrimony between the Jews and the Christians. In the 1960’s a change took place. One of the popes in Rome issued *fatwa*¹¹³ – he was paid for it, like our *ulama*¹¹⁴ of nowadays who also issue *fatwas* for money – he issued *fatwa* that the Romans killed and crucified Jesus, not the Jews, and that the Jews are innocent. The new Christian generations of the ’70s and ’80s don’t know

about this decree; it is not a part of their life; they did not live it. They are people born into the knowledge that the Romans killed Jesus, because the new generations are being taught this revised information in the schools. So they don’t even know that there ever was a *claim* that the Jews killed him. That’s how history is changed through time and due to politics, due to money, and due to power, and this took place in the 1960s, so I have personally lived it. And we are living today and seeing history being manipulated: Noriega was a CIA man, but because he became a disobedient boy, where is he today?¹¹⁵

While human beings change things from time to time, Muslims have the source which no one can change – the Qur’an – that is what protects Islam. God made it a promise: “Verily, We have revealed the Qur’an and We are going to protect it.”¹¹⁶ We always have to go back to the source to find out the truth and the principles by which to conduct our lives. The Qur’an relates the crucifixion to the Jews but states “They killed him not.” When you inform Christians of this, they ask, “How could this happen? He was killed to forgive our sins and you are saying that he was saved?!” So let us get back to analyzing the verses in the Qur’an which are related to Jesus.

The “raising up of Jesus” is mentioned in the Qur’an in chapter 4, verse 158:

بَلْ رَفَعَهُ اللَّهُ إِلَيْهِ وَكَانَ اللَّهُ عَزِيزًا حَكِيمًا

“Nay, God raised him unto Himself – and God is indeed almighty, wise.”

“بَلْ رَفَعَهُ اللَّهُ إِلَيْهِ” = *bar-rafa’u hu Allahu ’alayh* = Nay,

¹¹¹ While he himself had already escaped the city

¹¹² Here referring to those among the Jews who refused to acknowledge Jesus as a prophet and tried to destroy him.

¹¹³ A religious verdict

¹¹⁴ Religious leaders

¹¹⁵ Manuel Noriega, former president of Panama, was a CIA agent, reportedly receiving more than \$100,000 per year, for spying on Fidel Castro and Daniel Ortega; allowing the United States to set up listening posts in Panama, with which they monitored sensitive communications in all of Central America and beyond; aiding the American warfare against the rebels in El Salvador and the government of Nicaragua: facilitating the flow of money and arms to the Contras; allowing the US to base spy planes in Panama in clear violation of the canal treaties; giving the US permission to train Contras in Panama, and spying in support of American sabotage inside of Nicaragua. But, “because he became a disobedient boy”, the US invaded Panama in December 1989 to capture Noriega “and today where is he?” He is in a Florida prison serving a forty-year sentence for “drug trafficking”! [A documentary film about the Panama invasion, and the media complicity and cover-up of the whole affair also exists.]

¹¹⁶ See the sermon “The Qur’an, The First Source of Islam”

God raised him unto Himself.”

This “raising up of Jesus” is the subject of a lot of talks, debates, and arguments. But first, let us see what is the meaning of the

word *rāfi‘ah/rafā‘a* (رَفَعَ / رَفَعَةٌ). It will show you how the Arabic language is adaptable; and that is why, in translating the Qur’an, it is very hard to get the spirit of the Qur’an into the other language.

The word *rafā‘a* in Arabic could have different meanings depending on the context in which it is used. I could say, “Lift the Qur’an up high;” *lift* is *rafā‘a*. The expression *irfā‘al adhan* means, “Raise your voice with the adhan;” it is basically the same word *rafā‘a*. We can say, “The Prime Minister *ruffi‘a* to be a President” – meaning he was promoted; again it is from the same word *rafā‘a*. So the Arabic terminology can be shaped differently from one context to the other. The verse in chapter 4 says about Jesus: “Nay, God raised him up unto Himself (*bar-rafā‘a hu Allahu ‘alayhi*)... What does “raised him up” mean?

If you look into the different books of tafseer, you find that they are in conflict with regard to this verse, and the Muslim ulama have not reached any consensus about the meaning of “the raising of Jesus”. What is generally understood by the Muslims is that, when his people tried to kill Jesus, God saved him by “raising him unto Himself”. This group of Muslims says he is “still living there” and that he will come back to preach according to the message of Islam, which started by Adam and ended by Muhammad, and that the second coming of Jesus will be a sign that the Day of Judgment is near. The books of tafseer add another twist to the story also: what they call *al-maseeh ad-dajal*.¹¹⁷ They say this false messiah will be a *kafir*,¹¹⁸ but a man of great eloquence and will lead the people astray. Then Jesus (the true Messiah) will come and correct that situation. In the Shi‘i *madhab*¹¹⁹ they believe that their twelfth imam, Muhammad ibn Hassan Al Azghari, referred to as *Al Imam el Ghāyb*, will return to earth at the end of time and they identify the coming of Jesus with the reappearance of that Imam el Ghāyb. Some people refer to Jesus as *Mehdi al-Muntadar*.¹²⁰ So when you read Islamic books regarding that matter, you will never reach a conclusion. It is like being lost

in an ocean and not knowing your way because each one of the ulama gives his own opinion and that opinion, or *ijtehad*,¹²¹ could have been influenced by the prevailing ruler; or it could have originated with the person himself with all good intentions, or even ulterior motives.

Some Muslims ask: “Does it mean that Jesus was raised up physically by God and is still living in Heaven and never died?” My response to that is, I don’t know. And that is because it is a part of *al-ghāyb*.¹²² But, I gather some verses from the Qur’an [Imam quotes a lot of Arabic verses with the word “waffa” in all of them, and then explains.]

What is the meaning of *waffa*? One meaning of *waffa* is death (*waffia ajalo*) and it means someone finished his term in this world, graduated from this world, and went to the postgraduate in the Hereafter. But *waffa* can also have another meaning: sleeping. Sleeping is *waffa*; it means finishing a temporary term that will be resumed again. When you are sleeping, you are like the dead, and when you wake up in the morning, the life (or the soul) comes back to you. [Imam quotes Arabic verse. The translation is:]

“It is God alone who has this power to take (*Allahu yatawaffa* = اللَّهُ يَتَوَفَّى) the souls of men at the time of their death (*mawth*) and it is God alone who has this power to make human beings as if they are dead at the time that they are sleeping (*nawm*). Thus, if God has decreed death for a human being during his sleep, He withholds his soul from returning to his body, but those whose death is not decreed, He allows their souls to return to their bodies for a term set by Him. In all this, behold, there are messages indeed for those who think” [39:42].

In this verse “*waffa*” could mean “*mawth*” or “*nawm*” i.e. “death” or “sleeping” respectively. The *waffa* which is “sleeping” is for a certain term and will renew the next day. The “*waffa*” which is “death” is a completion of the term. Both are referred to as *waffa*.

The term *waffa*, where *death* is understood in the context, is mentioned in the Qur’an in a number of verses. For example, [Imam quotes several verses in Arabic. The translation is:]

“...Some of you are called to die (*minkum man yutawaffaa* =

¹¹⁷ The false messiah

¹¹⁸ Unbeliever

¹¹⁹ School of Thought

¹²⁰ The Expected One

¹²¹ A sincere effort to make an educated, enlightened and informed opinion explaining an issue related to Islam

¹²² The Unseen

(وَمِنْكُمْ مَّنْ يُتَوَفَّى) in childhood, and some are sent back to the feeblest old age. . . .”¹²³

“It is God who creates you and takes your souls at death. . . .”

(*yatawaffaakum* = *يَتَوَفَّاكُمُ*).¹²⁴

“O my Sustainer, take Thou my soul at death as one who has surrendered unto Thee (*tawaffani musliman* = *تَوَفَّنِي مُسْلِمًا*) and make me one with the righteous.”¹²⁵ The term “waffa” in all these verses means death.

So what is the meaning of “mutawaffi” (*مُتَوَفِّيكَ*) and

“*rafi’ah*” (*رَافِعُكَ*) in verse 3:55 which talks about Jesus?

“Lo! God said: ‘O Jesus! Verily, I shall *مُتَوَفِّيكَ* and

رَافِعُكَ and cleanse thee of the falsehoods of those who are bent on denying the truth; and I shall place those who follow thee far above those who are bent on denying the truth, unto the Day of Resurrection. In the end, unto Me you all must return, and I shall judge between you with regard to all on which you were wont to differ” [3:55].

The words of the Qur’an are: *مُتَوَفِّيكَ* (*Mutawaffi-*

ka: from *waffa*) and *رَافِعُكَ* (*Rāfi’u-ka*: from *rafa’u*). Does “waffa” here mean death (*mawth*)? Did Jesus die? Or, could it mean finishing a temporary term which will resume again, like sleeping (*nawm*)? Does *Rāfi’u* mean lift up, or raise up, or promote?

Some ulama say Jesus was raised up to the sky, body and soul. Some ulama say no, he was raised in soul only. A third group says it is neither: the meaning of *rafa’u* here is “rank”, or “degree”, or “status”. And they support this with the following Qur’anic verses: [Imam quotes the following verses. The English translation is:]

“And call to mind, through this divine writ, Idrīs. Behold he was a man of truth, a prophet, whom We exalted to a

lofty station (*وَرَفَعْنَاهُ مَكَانًا عَلِيًّا*).¹²⁶ It means God elevated him to a higher rank; it does not mean lifting up materially or physically.

“In the houses of worship which God has allowed to be raised so that His name be remembered in them, there are such as extol His limitless glory at morn and evening. . . .”¹²⁷

فِي بُيُوتِ أَذْنِ اللَّهِ أَنْ تُرْفَعَ means, in the houses of worship Allah has given permission that His name is *yurfa’*. Here it means, “*glorified*”.

“And this was Our argument which We vouchsafed unto Abraham against his people: for We do raise by degrees whom We will – *نَرْفَعُ دَرَجَاتٍ مِّنْ نَّشَاءٍ*.” That same word *rafa’u*

that is used here, is used in the verse related to Jesus, where people generally understand it to mean “lifting the body of Jesus up to the sky” but it means “We raise whomever We will to higher degrees.”¹²⁸

Furthermore, some ulama question the interpretation, “Nay,

God raised him *up* unto Himself *بَلْ رَفَعَهُ اللَّهُ إِلَيْهِ* by asking: Is God “*up*”? Or is He *everywhere*? Is God limited to a certain space or place? If so, then He could be seen.

Therefore, they say, the term *’alayhi* in the sense of “*up* to Himself” has no place in the philosophy of Islam because God is not limited to time or space. This topic, in fact, has gone through a lot of debate, and, in the end, this group of ulama say, what is meant, in fact, by these verses, is that Jesus was like *any other messenger of God*. Every messenger came to effect change and every change will be met with resistance. Therefore, when Jesus came to bring about a change, the people resisted him and tried to kill him like the prophets and messengers preceding him. And the Qur’anic verses came to say that all the machinations to kill Jesus will not succeed and that he will finalize his term in this life, then die naturally and be buried like any other human being. These verses, in fact, also answer many questions that the Christians nowadays are debating. Imam quotes Arabic verses. The translation is:]

“And lo! God will say [on the Day of Judgment]: O Jesus, son of Mary! Didst thou say unto men, ‘Worship me and

¹²³ 22:5

¹²⁴ 16:70

¹²⁵ 12:101

¹²⁶ 19:56-57

¹²⁷ 24:36

¹²⁸ 6:83

my mother as deities beside God?' He will answer: "Limitless art Thou in Thy glory! It would not have been possible for me to say what I had no right to say! Had I said this, Thou wouldst indeed have known it! Thou knowest all that is within myself, whereas I know not what is in Thy Self. Verily, it is Thou alone who fully knowest all the things that are beyond the reach of a created being's perception. Nothing did I tell them beyond what Thou bidst me to say: 'Worship God, who is my Sustainer as well as your Sustainer.' And I bore witness to what they did as long as I dwelt in their midst; but since *Thou has caused me to die* (تَوَفَّيْتَنِي = *tawaffaytani*), Thou alone hadst been their keeper: for Thou art witness unto everything" [5:116-117].

This part of the verse "When you caused me to die" means very clearly that Jesus died like any other human being and is buried under the dust just like any other human being.

In chapter 43, *Al-Zukhruf*, verses 57 to 65 talk about Jesus, and a part [in verse 61] says, "His coming is a sign of the Day of Judgment. . ." [The English translation of these verses is given below. Note that the words within brackets are interpolations by the translator to convey the message of the Qur'anic text and are not present in the original Arabic text.]

"Now whenever [the nature of] the son of Mary is set forth as an example, O Muhammad, lo! thy people raise an outcry thereat [in ridicule], and say, 'Which is better – our deities¹²⁹ or he?' But it is only in the spirit of dispute that they put this comparison before thee: yea, they are contentious folk! [43:57-58]

"[As for Jesus,] he was nothing but [a human being –] a servant [of Ours] whom We had graced [with prophethood], and whom We made an example for the children of Israel. And had We so willed, [O you who worship angels¹³⁰] We could indeed have made *you* into angels succeeding one another on earth! [43:59, 60]

"And [Jesus] shall be a sign [for the coming of] the Hour [of Judgment]: Therefore have no doubt about the (Hour) but follow ye Me: this is a straight way. And not let Satan bar you [from it] for, verily, he is your open foe!" [43:61-62]

"Now when Jesus came [to his people] with all evidence of the truth, he said: 'I have now come unto you with wisdom [divine revelation], and to make clear unto you some

of that on which you are at variance: hence, be conscious of God, and pay heed unto me. Verily, God is my Sustainer as well as your Sustainer; so worship [none but] Him: this [alone] is a straight way!" [43:63, 64]

"But factions from among those [who came after Jesus] began to hold divergent views [regarding the nature of Jesus and the inadmissibility of worshipping anyone but God]: woe, then unto those who are bent on evildoing – woe for the suffering [that will befall them] on a grievous Day!" [43:65].

Based on that verse (43:61 above), the ulama say, in the books of tafsir, that Jesus is still living and will return, and the second coming of Jesus will be a sign that the Day of Judgment is near. But, the majority of the Muslim scholars say that it is not a sin if any Muslim denies that "Jesus is still living", because there is no *clear-cut* Qur'anic verse, or authentic sunnah, which substantiates that, and, therefore, renders the question moot.

So, under the circumstances, what is advisable for us Muslims? There are a lot of verses in the Qur'an which are not clear. When we read them, we should not seek interpretations that may be far removed from what they mean. Not every statement in books that we get from our Muslim countries mentioning hadith and explaining Qur'anic verses should automatically be taken to be correct. The statements should be examined and weighed to see if they make sense and are reasonable. Some books of hadith are full of the "Israeli Hadith" which are sayings attributed to the holy Prophet, but which he never uttered.

I am reminded of an Egyptian priest in Detroit who wrote a book entitled "Jesus in the Qur'an". He quoted some Qur'anic verses and analyzed them in a way to serve his own purpose. He quoted a verse from Chapter 'Al-e-Imran'¹³¹ which says, "Behold the Angel said to Maryam, God has selected you, purified you, and made you preferred to all the women of the world." Then, the priest reasoned that if Maryam is preferred to all the women, then she is a rank above Amina, the mother of Muhammad. And if Maryam is above Amina, then the son of Maryam will be above the son of Amina. This means that Jesus is better and more esteemed than Muhammad. But the fact is that the Qur'an explains itself. The Qur'an says very clearly: "We make no distinction between one messenger and the other." It is a very clear-cut

¹²⁹ "Their deities" refers to the angels they were worshipping

¹³⁰ The pagan contemporaries of Muhammad

¹³¹ Chapter 3 in the Qur'an

The Crucifixion

verse,¹³² meaning that all the prophets are equal. All of them are selected by God. You cannot prefer one to the other. But if left to the inventions of human beings, then everyone wants to put his favorite messenger on the top and the rest below. This is incorrect from the aspect of Islam. But, unfortunately, the Muslims also suffer from this shortcoming. If you go to the mosques in our Muslim countries, you will find every imam on the *mimbar*¹³³ praying: “*wassalato wassalamo ‘ala* (peace and blessings be upon) *ashrafilmursaleen* (the best, the most dignified, the most honored of the messengers – Muhammad)...” This means that we are according

Muhammad a higher status than Jesus, Moses, Ibrahim, and all the rest. And, in turn, you are implying that the followers of that prophet are above the followers of the other prophets till the Day of Judgment. So we are making the same mistake. Going back to verse 3:55 which talks about Jesus, we can now understand its meaning: “Lo! God said: ‘O Jesus! I shall cause thee to die (*mutawaffi-ka*), and shall exalt thee unto Me (*raʿfi-ka*), and cleanse thee (*mutahhiru-ka*) of the presence of those who are bent on denying the truth; and I shall place those who follow thee far above those who are bent on denying the truth, unto the Day of Resurrection” [3:55].

¹³² 2:136

¹³³ The “podium” where he stands to deliver the sermon