

On the portrayal of the Messiah

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Abstract

Within religious belief systems, God serves to represent one or both of two ideas: the incomprehensible and uncontrollable nature of reality and the instantiation of all moral virtue. The research question for this paper is: how does the portrayal of Jesus in the Biblical Gospels compare to the Qur'anic portrayal of Prophet Issa? The focus of this essay will be to analyze the commonality and differences between their respective roles as the Messiahs within both texts; how their respective representations of the Messiah figure function as a means to convey their fundamental religious message. This essay will specifically discuss some of the similarities and differences with which the respective texts describe the circumstances surrounding their births, the antagonism directed towards them and their respective associations with the religion's deity. This will be a textual analysis of their respective character portrayals. The conclusion that is made from this investigation is that the characterizations of both Messiahs are meant to depict an awe-inspiring quality of God. In the Qur'an, the character of Prophet Issa serves to portray the God of Islam as a being who can never be subject to full human comprehension, making it foolish to attempt to either deify anyone else in comparison or to go against his will. Within the Gospels, the portrayal of the Messiah as "God made flesh" serves to portray a deity who is capable of understanding the basic human condition.

Introduction

Religions can be viewed as humanity's earliest proto-ethical systems. The function of a religion is to provide a grand narrative that serves as an all-encompassing ethical guideline.

In general, there are three underlying principles which formally unite religions in general: (1) The Divine is the ultimate source from which an ethical system may be developed; (2) the core doctrines of the faith offer a correctly formulated and elaborated ethical system that is based on the belief in The Divine, and (3) certain personalities serve as exemplars of how to properly live in accordance with this ethical system.

All ethical systems present an answer to the question of what it is that constitutes the best human life. According to Christianity and Islam, such a life is one which involves complete submission to the will of God. The representation that both religions have of God is that of an omnipotent, omnibenevolent being whose wisdom surpasses all human understanding.

It would evidently make sense to believe that the route to paradise that he has designed for an adherent to follow is the only one worth following. There is no better source of life advice

than the possessor of transcendental knowledge. Total adherence to his teaching guarantees a fulfilling life now and paradisaal life in the hereafter.

The importance of the sacred texts of each religion cannot therefore be understated. They offer tangibility to God's guidance. The Qur'an and the Bible are the divine writs of Islam and Christianity respectively in which God makes his voice heard to his followers. Both texts serve to primarily affirm God's divine position of authority within the religion and to detail the various ways in which its adherents should live their lives so as to bring honour to God and guarantee their salvation.

As they are both works of literature, they employ a number of different literary techniques for the purpose of elucidating their tenets. As is the case in any work of literature, characterization is key. It is within this conceptual framework that I base this paper.

Characters play an important role within religious texts. Characters serve as conduits for important thematic concepts. Their actions and general behaviour are reference points for votaries of the faith to either follow or disdain. As Islam and Christianity are both Abrahamic faiths, their respective texts contain characters with distinct similarities with regards to both their portrayal and purpose.

An intriguing example of this is Prophet Issa (PBUH) in the Qur'an and his Biblical counterpart, Jesus of Nazareth. Among the many characters encountered within both texts, none are more esteemed than these two men. The reason for that is they both hold the revered title of Messiah, a distinction that sets both men apart from all other characters.

The word Messiah is derived from the Hebrew, *mahsiah*, which means "the anointed". It was frequently used to refer to the Hebrew kings who were chosen specifically by God to be the sacred rulers of their people and were consecrated for this service (Asad, n.d.). Thus, the title of Messiah comes to hold a deeper and more powerful meaning within the contexts of both the Qur'an and the Bible as it implies that the titleholder was set apart.

Their life was consecrated and devoted irrevocably to the worship and service of God as his messenger. The title also signifies that such a person, having wholeheartedly submitted to God's guidance, maintains an outstanding level of piety and is thus the ultimate role model for adherents of the faith. Their life is a template for the pursuit of ultimate fulfilment. In effect, the character of the Messiah is more important than his teachings.

Prophet Issa and Jesus of Nazareth are the anointed men of God within the Qur'an and the Bible respectively. They are the moral exemplars of the faith. Thus, a study of their character is by consequence a study of the fundamental values of each religion videlicet those that are revered the most.

The goal of this comparative study is to identify the differences and similarities between the Qur'an's portrayal of the Messiah in the form of the Prophet Issa and the Bible's alternative in the form of Jesus of Nazareth, and to thus identify how their characterization contributes to the conveyance of their respective core ethical message. I will particularly focus on how the manner of their respective births, their relationship with their antagonists and their association with God are depicted.

Textual Differences

Before embarking on this character analysis, it is important to recognize some fundamental differences between the two texts with regards to the manner in which their respective messages are conveyed and the original language in which they were written.

The Bible isn't a single text but rather an epic collection of various individual pieces of literature, diverse in both genre and theme. Its 66 books are ordered according to chronology, subject and theme. Historical narrative is primarily used in order to sequence a coherent flow, one that starts from the explanation on the creation of the world and ending with eschatological prophecies (Smith, 2016).

The Christian message is thus brought out both explicitly, through the use of poetry, prophecy and proverbial writings, but also implicitly through the recount of the lives of significant individuals. In this respect, the Qur'an differs significantly from the Bible. Instead of inviting the reader to discern its message on their own, the lessons that are meant to be learnt are detailed to the reader

Its 114 surahs are arranged in accordance with the inner requirements of its message as a whole, and not in the chronological order in which the individual surahs or passages were revealed. (Asad, n.d.). "A true historical reading of the Qur'an must proceed processually, i.e., it must approach the Qur'an not as a monolithic textual corpus that is read in a basically synchronic fashion but rather as a diachronic series of individual texts." (Bauer, et al., 2010).

Its messages and their meaning are made clear to the reader in a concise manner and its most fundamental tenets are frequently repeated for emphasis. References to known historical events and the deeds of revered characters are intermittent and are only used to articulate important points.

Aside from the importance of its message, the Qur'an is revered in Islam for being a masterclass of Arabic literature. The Qur'an is said to have been revealed to Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) during the sixth century AD over a period of around twenty-three years (Asad, n.d.)

The Arabic language is regarded to have reached its peak in expression, richness, vocabulary, artistic value and poetry during that time (Who Wrote the Holy Qur'an?, n.d.). As the first piece of classical Arabic literature of any significant length, the Qur'an is heralded as the text which kick-started this golden age.

The impact that it had on the emergence of the Arabic language and culture, along with its sheer brilliance, is regarded as proof in itself of the text's sacredness. It united the different Arabian tribes under one central belief system. "Through its insistence on consciousness and knowledge, it engendered among its followers a spirit of intellectual curiosity and independent inquiry" (Asad, n.d.).

Furthermore, considering that the Prophet Muhammad is claimed to have been illiterate at the time, the fact that the Qur'an's Arabic is pure and sophisticated serves as proof that the Qur'an was dictated by God in its totality without any human influence in its message or writing style.

The Bible's library of books, on the other hand, consists of texts that were written over the course of 1500 years by 40 different authors (Smith, 2016). Within Christianity, the fact that the Bible maintains coherence in the delivery of its overall message in spite of its complex origins serves as proof that each individual author wrote their texts through divine inspiration.

While the Qur'an is viewed to be categorically God's work and that Muhammad simply relayed exactly what was revealed to him in the manner in which it was revealed to him, the books of the Bible convey the underlying message of God through the words of the inspired individuals who wrote them.

Furthermore, the original language in which the Biblical texts were written varies by time period. The Old Testament books were written in Hebrew at a time when the Jews were a sovereign nation and thus the language of the texts symbolizes an embrace of their own cultural identity.

The New Testament texts, on the other hand, were written in *Koiné* Greek during Roman occupation. *Koiné* Greek (also known as non-classical Greek) was the more common, unsophisticated dialect used by those for whom the language was not an indigenous tongue. A language that is acquired by non-native speakers generally becomes simplified and thus in an era in which foreign cultural influences were being imposed on the Jewish population, the usage of *Koiné* signified an adaptive response to this cultural imperialism (Lehmann & Slocum, 2016).

With all of this in mind, the scope of my analysis of the character portrayal of Jesus will be limited to the four Gospels, where the details of his life and works are written. Aspects of Prophet Issa's character are interspersed within the entire Qur'an and thus my analysis of his character will focus on the surahs and passages in which those aspects are mentioned.

Furthermore, as the Gospels are New Testament texts, they are all written in *Koiné* Greek. As a consequence of this, I am unable to study the Greek texts unassisted owing to my unfamiliarity with the language. Thus I will be using the Greek Interlinear New Testament text based on Frederick Scrivener's *Textus Receptus* of 1894, which was a well-respected attempt to reconstruct the Greek text underlying the King James or Authorized Version of 1611 (*Textus Receptus*, n.d.).

I am similarly unfamiliar with the Arabic of the Qur'an and thus I will be using the Sahih International translation of Umm Muhammad along with Muhammad Asad's *The Message of the Qur'an* to assist me in my reading of the Qur'an.

The Birth of the Messiah

The circumstances surrounding – and, indeed, the very occasion of – the birth of the Messiah to seem extraordinary within the two texts. Events which would otherwise be logically inconceivable and are described to have taken place either as a result of their births or as a sign of their imminent arrival in the world.

They act as accompanying signs and wonders which give authority to the message of their births as having come from God (Smith, 2016). Indeed, the most obvious sign is that of the

virgin birth. Both protagonists are born of a chaste woman; Jesus' mother, Mary, and Issa's mother, Maryam.

The news that the angel gives to Mary is that she will bring forth a son who will inherit "the throne of his father David". Mary is unchaste and this only further adds to her purity; making her a perfect candidate for this particular task. The child that Mary is to bear is special and the fact that God has indeed chosen her to bear this child makes her special in turn. She is blessed "among women" (Luke 1:28, 42).

Her character is further exemplified through the way in which she humbly accepts the privilege that is given unto her, referring to herself as the Lord's "slave" (Luke 1:38). The child is to be known as *Christou*, Christ; the Greek translation for "the anointed" (Matthew 1:18).

This term became synonymous with "king" and thus there is a double meaning to his title. His father, Joseph, was descended in direct line from the royal House of David (Asad, n.d.). This is the reason as to why it is proclaimed that God had given him "the throne of his father, David" (Luke 1:32).

The story of Prophet Issa's birth is told in the third (Al-'Imran) and nineteenth (Maryam) surahs. There is a greater focus on the House of 'Imran, Maryam's family line. When Maryam's mother prayed to God for a child. She accepted that the child she would receive would be "consecrated" (Surah 3:35) for service to Allah.

She, however, did not expect to be given a girl, but Allah knew what he wanted to do. By stating that "the male is not like the female" it is meant to imply that Maryam's excellence will exceed the hopes of her mother. She was consecrated for her service to Allah, and her particular service would be to give birth to the Messiah. Maryam is esteemed as a woman who was chosen by Allah "above the women of the worlds." (Surah 3:45).

Elizabeth's pregnancy in spite of her decrepitude serves to further emphasize God's omnipotence. It is something that simply would not happen under normal circumstances, but it wouldn't be difficult for God. Thus, there should be no doubt concerning his authority. Zechariah was made dumb by the angel due to his disbelief (Luke 1:20).

This would be a further sign that would proclaim the authority of God and it is done in order to make it known that something special was about to occur. In the Qur'an, it is stated that Allah also willingly causes unexpected or inconceivable events to occur. It serves to show that he is a being whose power and intentions are beyond any possible human comprehension.

He does these things because they are "easy" for him (Surah 19:21). Further, by stating that the Messiah being born in this manner was "a matter already decreed" (Surah 19:21), it means that the sequence of events which took place directly corresponded to the will of Allah, affirming his supreme control.

Furthermore, as a *dyah*; "a sign to the people" (Surah 19:21), Issa is a prophet; a vehicle of God's message to man and thus a symbol of his grace (Asad, n.d.). It is a matter that he is aware of from a very young age. In surah Al-'Imran, it is mentioned that Jesus would "speak

unto men [while yet] in his cradle” (Surah 3:46). This statement is perhaps meant to be interpreted as a figure of speech, meaning that Issa would be endowed with great wisdom and authority from a very young age. However, in surah Maryam, the baby boy actually speaks to a crowd barely hours after he had been born. There are two possible ways of looking at this occurrence.

It may be one of the miracles that are meant to affirm that his birth is a revelation from God or, as Asad mentions, it may be a trope, “projecting the shape of things to come by using, for the sake of emphasis, the past tense to describe something that was to become real in the future.” (Asad, n.d.). It is an allusion to the future. The same is true with Jesus in the Bible.

He became a respectable young man gaining favour “with God and man.” (Luke 2:52). His parents could not understand that he had already realized exactly who he was meant to be.

The Hatred of the Messiah

They are both victims of circumstance. As they are two individuals who were born to be morally upstanding, their personalities necessarily place them in conflict with the corrupt characters of the texts.

Jesus and Issa both made enemies because the messages they preached angered several people. Their teachings were rejected by individuals who refused to sacrifice their predilections for the true message, particularly those who were regarded as being the foremost teachers. They are hated because their very existence is an indictment of their character.

The words of Simeon (Luke 2:34-35) foreshadow future events. He talks of the way in which Jesus will be rejected by the people of Israel because of what he will do. He warns that she will suffer in turn as if a sword were pierced through her own soul. He describes him as a warning sign.

The Pharisees were a Jewish sect noted for their “strict observance of rites and ceremonies of the written law and for their insistence on the validity of their own oral traditions concerning the law” (Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary). The Sadducees were members of a Jewish party of the intertestamental period consisting of a traditional ruling class of priests.

They rejected all doctrines and notions that were not mentioned in the Laws of Moses such as resurrection, retribution in a future life and the existence of angels (Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary). The scribes were a learned class in the New Testament Judaea. They were the teachers of the Law of Moses.

They were the ones who studied the Scriptures and they also served as copyists, editors and jurists (Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary). Their arrogance manifests itself in the form of a hidebound character.

Jesus has an implacable dislike of the spiritual leaders of the Jewish community. He was the only man who was both willing and capable of openly challenging the authority of the

religious leaders. He was able to do this because he was in many ways their intellectual superior.

The problem that Jesus has with the religious leaders of the time is that they always seek to glorify their morality in front of others. They want to portray themselves as the only morally upright members of the Jewish society. Their ostentatious displays of knowledge and perceived morality makes them immoral.

The scribes are pedantic and legalist. They put too much emphasis on the adherence to the overly formal structure of their own oral traditions and forget the importance of mercy and doing the right things. He asks a sardonic rhetorical question to make them aware of the foolishness of their pedantic nature: “Whether is it easier to say to the sick of the palsy, ‘Thy sins be forgiven thee’ or to say, ‘Arise, and take up thy bed, and walk.’?” (Mark 2:9).

The people who willingly oppose the teachings of the prophets are portrayed as Allah’s enemies. Allah’s prophets are symbols of his grace to mankind; thus whoever rejects them, rejects his grace. They do this because they refuse to be confronted with what their “souls do not desire” and are thus “arrogant” (Surah 2:87).

The illogicality of their stubbornness is evident in two things. Firstly, they choose to exchange the message of the true Scripture “for a small price” (Surah 2:79). They reject the path to righteousness and follow a false doctrine that they claim to be scripture. They wrote the scripture “with their own hands” (Surah 2:79) is a figure of speech that is used to mean that some people had corrupted the true meaning of the scripture so that it would match their own evil desires.

The scandalous claim of the disbelievers that Issa’s miracles were acts of deception or acts of “obvious magic.” (Surah 5:110). It is matched by the claims of the unbelieving scribes that “by the prince of the devils casteth he out devils.” (Mark 3:22).

It must be noted that Jesus is not presented as one to shirk confrontation. Every remark that Jesus made to or concerning the religious leaders was made to humiliate them. Having built themselves an aura of untouchability, Jesus made sure that he would expose them for the frauds they really were.

Furthermore, the retorts that he made to them were mostly provoked responses in which their attempts to catch him in the wrong would backfire. This meant that Jesus was a constant source of frustration for them, driving them to the point of insanity as “they were filled with madness” (Luke 6:11).

Their arrogance thus leads them to challenge Allah; an endeavour in futility. It once more serves to confirm his superiority over all human comprehension. Allah prevented them from being able to kill Issa and, to add further insult to their failed attempt, made them come under the impression that they had actually succeeded.

According to the Sahih International translation, Allah did this by making another person “resemble him to them” (Surah 4:157) so that they ended up crucifying the wrong person. However, in Muhammad Asad’s translation he interprets this phrase as “it only appeared to them as if it had been so”.

According to him this may imply that this legend had been forged and developed over time, in which future generations were led to believe that they had actually managed to put him to death. Nevertheless, both interpretations serve to demonstrate how Issa's enemies had been deliberately misled by Allah.

God and the Messiah

“It is easy for Me, and We will make him a sign to the people and a mercy from Us.” (Surah 19:21). This is an example of the frequent occasions within the Qur'an in which different pronouns are used within one sentence to refer to Allah.

This change in pronouns is used as a “linguistic device meant to stress the idea that God is not a person and cannot, therefore, be really circumscribed by the pronouns applicable to finite beings.” (Asad, n.d.). It is a fundamental assertion within Islam that all aspects of the human imagination, including language, would be incapable of sufficiently encapsulating the true nature of God.

God supported Issa with the “Pure Spirit” (Surah 2:87). As a “sign to the people” (Surah 19:21), Issa is a prophet; a vehicle of God's message to man and thus a symbol of his grace (Asad, n.d.). Issa is a willing servant of Allah and he would never “disdain from being a servant of Allah” (Surah 4:172) and neither would he claim divinity in place of Allah.

The fundamental point of conflict between the two characterizations is with regard to the attribution of divinity. Attributing divinity to anything or anyone other than Allah is considered to be both “spiritually destructive” and “logically inadmissible” (Asad, n.d.).

This is emphasized where Allah presents the following argument to Prophet Muhammad: “who could prevent Allah at all if He intended to destroy Christ, the son of Mary?” (Surah 5:17). This emphasizes the fact that Issa is a finite being who had been given the privilege of life by Allah, a privilege that Allah could as easily revoke.

Issa was merely one of Allah's creation as is evident from his comparison to the first human, Adam: “He created him from dust” (Surah 3:59). Thus, one is reminded that not even one of Allah's greatest moral exemplars is to be regarded as anything other than his subordinate. Issa will be held accountable for his actions on the Day of Judgement, just like every other human being, as is stated in the discourse that he has with Allah.

On the other hand, by being called “Emmanuel” (which means ‘God with us’) he is deemed to be the physical manifestation of God on earth (Matthew 1:23). He will be the symbol of God's grace. His name foreshadows his life. It is made obvious that since Jesus had been conceived of the Holy Spirit, he was thus the “Son of God” (Luke 1:35).

An interesting thing, however, is the fact that Jesus more frequently refers to himself as the “Son of Man” rather than the “Son of God”. “Son of Man” was a title that Jesus exclusively designated to himself. No other character within the Gospels referred to him as such. (Stewart, n.d.)

This has often been used to argue against the idea that Jesus was in fact divine. However, a simple response to this claim is offered by Ron Rhodes: “The incarnation of Christ did not involve the subtraction of deity, but the addition of humanity.” (Rhodes, 1999).

Conclusion

The representation of the Messiah in the Qur’an and the Gospels serves to indicate the nature of the relationship between the adherents of the respective faiths and their recognized deity. Prophet Issa is an individual who is blessed with Allah’s wisdom and protection.

The most striking aspect of his character is that he insists on proclaiming himself to be a mere servant of Allah and to not boast about his favour. The same sort of humility is seen with Jesus in the Bible. In spite of the fact that he is quite literally God in the form of a man, he similarly doesn’t make too much of a show of his own glory unless it is to help others.

As Muhammad Asad puts it, the purpose of the Qur’an is to guide people in all their “spiritual and worldly affairs” using a “predominantly rational approach” in the process of answering religious questions (Asad, n.d.).

As a being who is perceived to be beyond the realms of human comprehension, the God of Islam is deserving of reverence. It is thus considered an insult to God to try to associate anything with him let alone raise anything to the level of a deity in his place. The Biblical interpretation of God, on the other hand, is slightly different.

While similarly being omnipotent, the Christian deity is portrayed as one who actively seeks out his followers by presenting himself in the form of a perfect human being. It shows how religions don’t merely provide different answers to existential questions but they in turn ask different questions.

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