

# Islamic Interpretations of Christianity

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# Christianity in the Qur'ān

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“Christianity in the Qur'ān” is so broad a subject that for the purposes of this study the relevant Qur'ānic material needs to be broken down into more manageable categories. The approach adopted here is therefore to subdivide “Christianity” into three themes suggested by the Qur'ān itself: “Jesus and Mary”; “scripture”; and “Christians.” Other categories than these could have been used to subdivide the Qur'ānic material further, such as “Christian practices” (e.g. monasticism), or “Christian doctrines” (e.g. the Trinity). Lines must be drawn somewhere, however, and I hope that the three thematic categories which I have chosen provide a reasonable framework for making sense of the Qur'ānic material. As well as grouping the material thematically in this way, this study also adopts a chronological approach. The basic structure of the study is thus as follows. I begin with an examination of relevant Qur'ānic passages from the Meccan period of Muḥammad's preaching (roughly 609–22 CE), dealing with passages firstly on Jesus and Mary, secondly on scripture, and thirdly on Christians. Then I turn to the Medinan period (622–32 CE) and work through the same three categories again. The intention is to give some sense of how the Qur'ānic treatment of these themes evolves alongside developments in the experience of Muḥammad and his followers.<sup>1</sup>

## I. THE MECCAN PERIOD

What the Qur'ān says about Christianity in this period needs to be understood against the backdrop of Muḥammad's experience in Mecca. During the Meccan period, the main challenge facing Muḥammad was to preach to the polytheists of Mecca. The essence



of his message was that they should turn from idolatry to the worship of the one true God, and should submit to the moral reformation which God demanded of them. If they rejected the message they faced the prospect of divine punishment, both in this life and in the hereafter. During this period Muḥammad gained some followers, but by and large he encountered rejection and ridicule.

Muḥammad's preaching to the Meccans involved two crucial claims which related his activity to Christianity. These two interdependent claims are that Muḥammad is a messenger sent by God and that he is the bearer of a divine revelation. These claims are set within the wider Qur'ānic vision of the history of God's activity in the world. At the heart of this vision is the belief that God has repeatedly sent messengers entrusted with divine revelations to provide guidance for human beings. The Qur'ān mentions many such messengers, one of whom is Jesus. So Jesus and the revelation brought by him constitute one episode in the great history of divine activity, of which now, in Mecca, Muḥammad and the message revealed through him are the latest manifestation.

### Jesus and Mary<sup>2</sup>

As we turn now to Meccan passages dealing with Jesus and Mary, it should first be acknowledged that there are a number of other religious figures about whom the Qur'ān has considerably more to say. At least part of the explanation for this can be grasped if we keep in mind the question of *the immediate relevance to Muḥammad's situation in Mecca* of the different Qur'ānic stories about the messengers sent before him. These stories are not recited by Muḥammad in a spirit of detached interest in religious history; rather, they bear on what is happening around him in the present. For example, there seems to have been a particular relevance to Muḥammad at Mecca in a group of stories which are essentially variants on one basic story-line. These stories depict a messenger sent by God who preaches to his people, is rejected by them, but is finally vindicated when God intervenes to punish the unbelievers (e.g. with the flood in the case of Noah, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah in the case of Lot, and so on). These stories are so often repeated in the Meccan period (e.g. notably in *sūras* 7, 11 and 26) that it is natural to assume that they are particularly relevant to Muḥammad at Mecca: they reflect his situation as an embattled preacher of monotheism and his hopes of vindication through God's



intervention.<sup>3</sup> The messengers depicted in these stories thus serve as models of Muḥammad in Mecca; their stories are an encouragement to him and his followers in their difficult situation (see 11: 120). For our present purposes the important point is that although a number of other messengers feature in these stories, Jesus does not.

Indeed, the fact that Jesus features in only one extended narrative from the whole Meccan period (19: 16–33) is a strong indication that (unlike Noah, Abraham, Lot, Moses and others) he did not, at this stage, represent an especially relevant model to Muḥammad. This point gathers strength as we look more closely at that narrative and notice that it in fact focuses rather more attention on Mary than on Jesus. An angel sent by God (literally “our spirit” (19: 17)) tells Mary that she is to give birth to a “pure boy” (19: 19). She asks how this can be when she is a virgin; she is assured that it is easy for God and that the child will be “a sign to humankind and a mercy from [God]” (19: 21).<sup>4</sup> Mary then withdraws to a distant place where she gives birth to Jesus and is miraculously provided with food and drink. On her return to her people, however, she is accused of sexual immorality. This evokes a further miracle: the infant Jesus speaks from the cradle, thereby implicitly vindicating his righteous mother and shaming her detractors.<sup>5</sup>

Despite the great significance of this speech by the infant Jesus, it is at least arguable that the main interest of the narrative, and certainly its main relevance to Muḥammad in Mecca, is in Mary's drama. Like Muḥammad, Mary receives a divine message brought to her personally by an angelic being; Muḥammad might therefore naturally have seen in Mary somebody whose experience was similar to his own. Furthermore, like Muḥammad, Mary experiences rejection and vilification by her own people because of this divine initiative singling her out for a special task. Then she is miraculously vindicated by God in the face of those who scoff at her – the dénouement for which the rejected Muḥammad waited and hoped. Thus at least part of the significance of this narrative is that it contains the pervasive Meccan motif of the rejection and vindication of God's chosen servant, a theme which was highly relevant to Muḥammad's experience and his expectations. It may seem strange to think of Mary functioning as a type of Muḥammad in this way, and indeed it may well be that the obvious dissimilarities between Mary and Muḥammad account for the fact that, unlike a number of Meccan narratives, this Mary-narrative is not repeated.<sup>6</sup>

This analysis of the story of Mary indicates that despite the fact that there is comparatively little Meccan material on Jesus and Mary, such



material as there is should be interpreted in the light of the basic observation that the Qur'ānic Mary and Jesus have their significance and their coherence in their relatedness to the experience of Muḥammad.<sup>7</sup> They are part of the religious pre-history which culminates in the coming of Muḥammad and the revelation of the Qur'ān. The miraculous speech of the infant Jesus (19: 30–33) further illustrates this point. The self-description of Jesus in vv. 30–31 (as with so much of the speech of the Qur'ānic prophets) could be put into the mouth of Muḥammad without any alteration:

I am God's servant; God has given me the Book, and made me a Prophet  
... and he has commanded me to pray and to give alms as long as I live.<sup>8</sup>

Of other Meccan references to Jesus and Mary, two brief passages (21: 93–5 and 23: 50) speak of their revelatory significance; together they constitute a “sign” (*āya*). Two other passages merely refer to Jesus in passing in a list of other prophets (6: 85 and 42: 13). One other reference merits some comment:

✓ And when the son of Mary is cited as an example, behold your people [i.e. the Meccan pagans] turn away from it and say: “What, are our gods better, or he?” They only cite him to provoke an argument; nay, but they are a contentious people! He is only a servant whom we [God] blessed, and we made him an example to the Children of Israel. (43: 57–9, see also vv. 60–65)

The context here is interesting. In reaction to Muḥammad's reference to Jesus, the Meccan polytheists imply that in comparison with their own gods Jesus is only an inferior deity whom they can ignore. The Meccans therefore need to be corrected at two points. Firstly, Jesus is a servant (*abd*), human, not divine; it is important to grasp that the Qur'ān does not interpret the conception of Jesus without a human father (as mentioned above) as a sign of any kind of incarnation. But secondly, Jesus is more important than the Meccans imagine; he is a significant figure from religious history (a servant blessed by God), who came with miracles and made clear that worship of the one God is the “straight path” to which Muḥammad is pointing the Meccans (vv. 63–4). Furthermore, Jesus is not merely a figure from the past; a mysterious eschatological role seems to be ascribed to him in the enigmatic phrase “he is knowledge of the hour” (v. 61).<sup>9</sup>

✓ The main thrust of this passage is against Meccan paganism; its comments about Jesus primarily have the correction of such paganism in mind. Nevertheless, there is here also an implicit criticism of any



tendency to think of Jesus in divine terms; he is indeed a “blessed servant,” but no more than that. So even though Christians are not directly addressed in this passage, it may be that we have here an early critical reference to Christian attitudes to Jesus.<sup>10</sup> ✓

### Scripture

From the earliest Meccan period there are references to scriptures revealed by God in the past. It is possible that one such reference occurs in the passage traditionally believed to have been the first revelation received by Muḥammad:

Recite: And your Lord is the most generous,  
who taught by the pen,  
taught man what he did not know. (96: 3–5)

Although the phrase here translated “taught by the pen,” (*‘allama bi’l-qalam*) could be translated as “taught the art of writing,” it is more natural, in both the immediate and the wider Qur’ānic contexts, to see here a reference to the mysterious reality of revelation.<sup>11</sup> What human beings could not otherwise know, God makes known to his chosen servant, and the revealed words, written down “by the pen,” are preserved in scripture.

A number of other Meccan passages mention scriptures of the past. For example, the early *sūra* 87 ends:

Surely this is in the ancient scrolls (*ṣuḥuf*),  
the scrolls of Abraham and Moses. (87: 18–19)

The claim here is that the message which Muḥammad has just recited is in agreement with what is contained in the scriptures of Abraham and Moses. Elsewhere the question is asked in a tone of surprise whether those who doubt Muḥammad’s message are not aware of the contents of earlier scriptures, again implying agreement between them and what Muḥammad is reciting (53: 36–7; 20: 133; cf. 21: 7; 16: 43; 10: 94). The point is also made that the Meccans, who previously have received no scripture (68: 37; 43: 21; 34: 44), are now being addressed in a divine revelation in Arabic, their own language (e.g. 43: 3; 12: 2).

So just as Muḥammad claims to be the latest manifestation of the divine activity of sending messengers, he also claims that his message is the latest manifestation (in this case in Arabic) of the divine activity of revealing scripture. In both cases Christianity features in much the same way. Just as Jesus is mentioned among Muḥammad’s precursors, so also



the scripture revealed through Jesus is understood as a precursor of the scripture revealed through Muḥammad. It is a neat illustration of the Qur'ānic understanding of revelation-history that shortly before the infant Jesus declares that God has given him "the Book" (*al-kitāb*, 19: 30), the term *al-kitāb* has been used of the scripture given to John (the Baptist), the precursor of Jesus (19: 12), and also of the message being received in the present by Muḥammad (19: 16).

The point was made earlier that other messengers are mentioned much more frequently than Jesus in Meccan passages. Not surprisingly, then, there is comparatively little emphasis in this period on the scripture which Jesus brought. There are some general references to earlier scriptures (e.g. 20: 133; 12: 111; 10: 94), which could be taken to include the scripture given to Jesus, but the only specific reference which is clearly Meccan is that at 19: 30.<sup>12</sup> At this stage Moses is a much more significant figure, so there is naturally more interest in the scripture which he brought (e.g. 32: 23; 41: 45; 17: 2; 40: 53; 28: 43).

### Christians

In view of what we have seen so far, it is not surprising that in the Meccan period there is very little reference to Christians. "There were ... Christians in Mecca, traders and slaves, but the influence of isolated individuals was probably not so important [as elsewhere in Arabia]."<sup>13</sup> In the absence of any organised Christian community to serve as a substantial subject for Muḥammad's attention, his preaching was naturally directed chiefly towards the polytheists of Mecca.

✓ However, as Bell points out, "during the whole of the Meccan period of his activity Muḥammad's attitude to the People of the Book, which must be taken as including both Jews and Christians ... was consistently friendly."<sup>14</sup> One indication of this attitude can be found in a group of passages, admittedly all somewhat obscure, which might refer to Christians of earlier generations. The earliest such passage (85: 4–8) is often taken as describing the martyrdom of certain sixth century Christians from Najrān (in Southern Arabia) at the hands of ✓ "the men of the pit."<sup>15</sup> If so, these Christians are described simply as "believers," and thus serve as models of faithfulness for the persecuted followers of Muḥammad. Another image of Christians being faithful under persecution is present in the story of the "men of the cave" (18: 9–26), the Qur'ānic version of the legend of the "Seven Sleepers" which "was widely known and often referred to in Christian literature."<sup>16</sup> The young men are faithful believers in God and shun



idolatry. If the Christian origin of this story was known by those who heard Muḥammad, this again portrays Christians of the past as models for Muḥammad's followers. Again, the unnamed messengers of the narrative at 36: 13–32 have been identified with Christian apostles sent to Antioch.<sup>17</sup> Another relevant passage is 30: 2–5, which has often been interpreted as implying a sympathy for the Christian forces of Byzantium in their wars against the Persians.<sup>18</sup>

In a quite different register, there are Meccan passages in which those who doubt the truth of Muḥammad's message are encouraged to consult those who read a scripture revealed before Muḥammad (21: 7; 16: 43; 10: 94, where it is Muḥammad himself who seems to be attacked by self-doubt). Such passages clearly imply a confidence that the Jews and Christians of his own day will support Muḥammad by vouching for the truth of his claims. Much the same confidence is reflected at 6: 20, which says that those to whom the Book has been given recognise the Qur'ān (or possibly Muḥammad) "as they recognise their sons" (cf. 6: 114).<sup>19</sup> However, it is important to note that these passages speak of Jews and Christians together as the "People of the Book" (*ahl al-kitāb*); they do not refer specifically to Christians. A comparison of these generalised Meccan references with more specific Medinan references, where Jews and Christians are sometimes sharply distinguished (e.g. 2: 113; 5: 82–5), leaves one with a sense that whereas the Medinan passages reflect actual encounters with specific Jews and Christians, the Meccan passages do not give quite the same impression.

So how should we interpret these Meccan references to Jews and Christians as those who vouch for the truth of Muḥammad's message? It is of course possible (as Rahman argues<sup>20</sup>) that Muḥammad did encounter some positive response from Christians at Mecca, although this would be hard to establish conclusively. Alternatively, it might be argued that the Meccan allusions to the People of the Book are based not (or at least not principally) on concrete encounters with specific people, as at Medina, but rather on theoretical assumptions about what Jews and Christians *should be like* and about how they can be *expected* to respond. Just as Jesus and the scripture revealed to him are conceived of as forerunners of Muḥammad and the Qur'ān, so also Christians can only be thought of as people who will acknowledge the truth of Muḥammad's message.

As yet, Muḥammad's confidence in this last assumption has not been dented. But despite the basically positive view of Christians which underlies the Meccan period, there are already one or two



slightly discordant notes. In the argument between Muḥammad and the Meccans about the status of Jesus which was discussed earlier (43: 57–65), the Meccans seem to be alluding to some kind of Christian worship of Jesus in their words to Muḥammad (“What, are our gods better, or he?”). So in the response given by Muḥammad (that Jesus is no more than a servant blessed by God) there is clearly an implied criticism of those, Christian or pagan, who regard Jesus as divine. If this indicates that already at Mecca Muḥammad is aware of this aspect of contemporary Christian practice, then this will naturally colour the way we interpret the many Meccan passages which attack the idea of God taking a son (e.g. 23: 91; 21: 26; 25: 2; 18: 4; 10: 68; 112: 3). Although the immediate target of this polemic is presumably polytheistic Arabian ideas of “sons of God,” it would be wrong to assume that such passages cannot also be referring to Christian beliefs.<sup>21</sup>

Another recurrent theme in the Meccan period which slightly counterbalances the basically positive view of Christians is that of the divisions among them. It is striking that references to these divisions occur after every significant Meccan passage on Jesus. For example, one brief mention of Mary and Jesus culminates as follows:

✓ “Surely this community of yours is one community,  
and I am your Lord; so serve me.”

But they split in their affair between them into sects,  
each party rejoicing in what is with them. (23: 52–3; cf. 21: 92–3; 43: 65)

Given the well-known doctrinal and political tensions between the main Christian groupings of the day (Byzantines, Monophysites and Nestorians), it is hardly surprising that these find an echo in the Qur’ān, even at a period when there is little contact between Muḥammad and Christians.

## II. THE MEDINAN PERIOD

Muḥammad’s move from Mecca to Medina in 622 CE (the *hijra*) was to prove an important transition in several ways. In Medina Muḥammad became the leader of a religio-political community which overcame opposition from many quarters and by the time of his death in 632 CE had grown to be a dynamic new power, poised to conquer an astonishing swathe of territory in the following decades. For our present purposes certain key factors in the Medinan context need to be highlighted.



Firstly, whereas at Mecca it is unclear what, if any, significant contact Muḥammad had with Jews and Christians, at Medina the situation is quite different. Relations with the large Jewish population of Medina are a dominant theme in the early Medinan period (see especially 2: 40–150). There is also significant contact with Christians, although this seems largely to have taken place later in the Medinan period.

Secondly, as a result of these contacts we witness during the Medinan period an increasing sense of definition of Muḥammad and his community over against Jews and Christians. This is reflected in a number of ways. For example, Abraham, a crucial figure from religious history, is claimed as one who prefigured the faith of Muḥammad and his followers, rather than that of Jews and Christians.<sup>22</sup> The most important treatment of Abraham (2: 124–41) leads immediately into a passage (vv. 142–50) discussing the change of the *qibla* (the direction for prayer adopted by Muḥammad and his followers) from Jerusalem to Mecca. This development is generally regarded as the decisive moment in Muḥammad's "break with the Jews" and is therefore a concrete mark of the religious distinctiveness of Muḥammad's community. There also appears to be a gradual process by which *islām*, the Arabic for "submission" (of oneself to God), comes to denote not only an inner spiritual attitude but also adherence to a specific religious way of life, distinct from others, embodied in the community of Muḥammad and his followers (e.g. especially 3: 19–20, 85; 5: 3).

Thirdly, the political and military dimension of Muḥammad's conflict with his opponents in the Medinan period is another key factor determining his attitude to other faith-communities. Towards the end of the Medinan period this factor impinges sharply on relations with Christians.

### **Jesus and Mary**

To understand the Medinan passages on Jesus and Mary it is vital to keep in mind Muḥammad's changing context and the different groups who might be addressed in any particular passage. It is especially important not to assume that passages concerned with Jesus and Mary must originally have been addressed to Christians; as we shall see, some of this material is best explained as having originated in Muḥammad's conflict with the Jews of Medina. The analysis here assumes three broad phases in the portrayal of Jesus and Mary at



Medina: an early phase in which little is said about them; a second phase in which the governing factor is polemic against the Jews of Medina; and a final phase in which polemic against Christians comes to the fore.

The early Medinan period is reflected in *sūra* 2, which dates from between the *hijra* and the battle of Badr (624 CE). It is a further reminder of the comparatively minor place of Jesus and Mary in the Qur'ān that in the whole of *sūra* 2, easily the longest *sūra*, there are only a few passing references to Jesus and none to Mary (other than in the phrase "Jesus son of Mary"). Apart from a mention of Jesus in a list with other prophets (2: 136) and a brief passage which seems to attack Christian beliefs about Jesus (2: 116–17), it is twice said that God gave Jesus "clear signs" (i.e. miracles) and "confirmed him with the holy spirit" (2: 87, 253). Although Christian interest might be aroused by this link between Jesus and "the holy spirit," it should be noted that this theme is not further developed in the Qur'ān and is not central to its portrayal of Jesus. In *sūra* 2 there is much narrative material concerned with various other figures from the past, most notably Adam (vv. 30–9); Moses (vv. 49–74); Abraham and Ishmael (vv. 124–41); and Saul and David (vv. 246–51). Much of this material has no parallels in the Meccan narratives; these are new narratives for a new situation and they have obvious relevance to the challenges facing Muḥammad in Medina, such as his disputes with the Jews and the need to stir up his followers to fight their enemies. Up to this point we can conclude, much as we did when analysing the Meccan material, that ✓ Jesus has become neither a particularly significant model for Muḥammad nor a figure around whom important arguments have centred.

This situation begins to change in the second Medinan phase, where we find slightly more attention paid to Jesus and Mary, especially at 3: 33–58. This long narrative section must be understood in the light of Muḥammad's relationship with the Jews of Medina in the period shortly after the battle of Badr. The refusal of the great majority of the Jews to acknowledge Muḥammad as a prophet, along with the political threat to Muḥammad which they posed, made this relationship extremely tense, with the threat of violent conflict in the air; this mood of hostility is reflected at various points in the rest of *sūra* 3 (e.g. vv. 19–25, 65–85, 98–9, 110–12, 187). Just as in *sūra* 2 (vv. 40–150), so here in *sūra* 3 Jewish opposition to the mission of Muḥammad prompts a history-lesson. However, whereas in *sūra* 2 the focus was ✓ on the disobedience of the children of Israel in the days of God's



messenger Moses, in *sūra* 3 the narrative culminates in the account of Jewish unbelief and hostility towards God's messenger Jesus.

The narrative begins with the birth of Mary and then describes her piety and favoured place in God's sight (vv. 35–7); God also declares that he has purified her and chosen her "above all the women of the world" (v. 42). The great emphasis here on Mary's godliness and purity suggests that this passage is assuming awareness of (and of course rejecting) the accusation of sexual impurity which her Jewish fellow-people made against her. As we saw earlier, this accusation is mentioned in a Meccan Mary-narrative (19: 27–8); it is alluded to again in a later Medinan passage (4: 156). It is natural to assume that this part of the wider Qur'ānic understanding of Mary's story would also be in mind here. If so, the narrative in *sūra* 3 seems to be presenting Mary as a righteous servant of God whom (as was common knowledge) the Jews rejected, but who (unbeknown to them) was greatly honoured by God.

It is possible that the same point is being made by the brief reference to Zachariah and the birth of his son John (the Baptist) which is embedded in the account of Mary (vv. 38–41). John is praised as "a chief, and chaste, a prophet, one of the righteous" (v. 39). Neither here nor in the other references to Zachariah and John (19: 2–15; 21: 89–90) is there any reference to John's death at the hands of ungodly Jews, but as in the account of Mary it may be that a fuller knowledge of John's story is here being assumed. Given the recurrent motif that the Jews had killed prophets sent before Muḥammad (especially frequent in *sūra* 3, e.g. vv. 21, 112, 181, 183), this is not at all implausible. It would certainly make very good sense in the wider context of the Jewish hostility to Muḥammad reflected in *sūra* 3 if these accounts of the births of Mary and John were originally intended to call to mind earlier servants of God whom the Jews rejected but whose honour was upheld by God (and who therefore prefigure Muḥammad at Medina).

Such certainly seems to be the purpose of the passage about Jesus (vv. 45–57). This begins by stressing his high status before God:

The angels said:

"Mary, God gives you good news of a word from him  
whose name is Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary;  
high honoured shall he be in this world and the next,  
near stationed to God." (v. 45)

The narrative goes on to emphasise the role of Jesus as "a messenger to the Children of Israel"; he comes with miraculous "signs" from God



to validate his mission; he confirms the Torah (their own scripture) and makes lawful “certain things that before were forbidden” (vv. 49–50). The reaction to Jesus is divided. On the one hand his disciples (*al-ḥawāriyyūn*) speak as follows, in language identical to that of the believers at Medina:

“We will be helpers of God; we believe in God;  
witness that we have submitted ourselves to him.  
Lord, we believe in what you have sent down  
and we follow the messenger.” (vv. 52–3)

On the other hand, some respond in unbelief (v. 52) and scheme against Jesus (v. 54). This leads to the mysterious climax of Jesus’ earthly life:

God said: “Jesus, I will take you to myself [or “I will cause you to die”]  
and I will raise you to myself,  
and I will purify you of those who do not believe.” (v. 55)

For now, we can leave the question of whether or not this passage speaks of Jesus genuinely dying, an issue to which we shall return. What is important for our present purposes is that Jesus has been presented as one sent by God (like Muḥammad) whom the Jews reject with murderous intent. God, however, frustrates the schemes of the unbelievers (v. 54) and, in some mysterious way, vindicates his servant by raising him to himself.

Here, in this context of Jewish hostility in Medina, the Qur’ānic Jesus functions as a model for Muḥammad to a far greater extent than he has before. The parallels between Jesus and Muḥammad are very clear at many points, perhaps most strikingly in Jesus’ appeal: “Who will be my helpers unto God?” (v. 52), where the word for “helpers” (*anṣār*) is the term used of those who became Muḥammad’s followers at Medina.<sup>23</sup> The drama of human rejection and divine vindication played out in the life of this earlier messenger to the Jews thus serves to foreshadow Muḥammad’s own situation, both encouraging him and warning his Jewish opponents of the futility of their hostility (vv. 55–6).<sup>24</sup>

Other passages from this phase reinforce the same impression. In *sūra* 61 Jesus is again portrayed as a messenger of God addressing the children of Israel, confirming the Torah, summoning helpers (*anṣār*) and provoking a mixed response among the Jews; as at 3: 55–6, the downfall of the unbelievers among them is also guaranteed (61: 6, 14). An important additional detail here is that Jesus announces the coming of a future messenger “whose name shall be *aḥmad*” (61: 6). Whether



the word *ahmad* should be translated as a name (a version of Muḥammad), or as “more highly praised,” the reference is clearly to Muḥammad; Jesus is yet more clearly being presented as his forerunner.<sup>25</sup>

4: 153–62 is another passage of polemic against the Jews of Medina. Here the catalogue of sins committed by Jews of the past begins with events in the time of Moses (vv. 153–5). The diatribe continues:

... and for their unbelief, and their uttering against Mary a mighty calumny,  
and for their saying,  
“We killed the Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, the messenger of God” –  
yet they did not kill him, neither crucified him,  
only a likeness of that was shown to them ...  
they certainly did not kill him –  
no indeed: God raised him up to himself ... (4: 156–8)

After the brief reference to their accusation against Mary of immorality, the focus here is on the Jews' claim to have killed Jesus, which is rejected. Orthodox Muslim commentators understand this passage to mean that Jesus did not die on the cross; often they suggest that someone else (e.g. Judas) died in his place while God exalted Jesus alive to heaven.<sup>26</sup> Some non-Muslim scholars have argued that the passage does not deny the reality of Jesus' death, but rather denies that it was *the Jews* who were ultimately responsible for this event; a cross-reference to 8: 17 might even suggest that the crucifixion of Jesus should be seen as a divine initiative. Appeal is made to other passages (such as 3: 55) which could be taken to imply that Jesus truly died on the cross.<sup>27</sup>

However, it must be stressed that even if it could be established that the Qur'ān does teach that Jesus genuinely died on the cross and was then raised by God to heaven, this episode would still have to be interpreted within the Qur'ānic frame of reference, which has no place for ideas of atonement. The death and resurrection of the messenger Jesus would in that case be the specific outworking in his story of the wider Qur'ānic theme of God's vindication of his messengers after their rejection by their unbelieving people; the events at the end of Jesus' earthly life would certainly not be seen as the key moment in God's redemptive purposes for humanity.<sup>28</sup>

Although the question of whether or not Jesus truly died on the cross is clearly of some significance for Muslim-Christian dialogue, it need not be pursued further in this context. Here we need simply to note that, however 4: 157 understands what happened on the cross, its



essential message, which in context is directed to the Jews, is that their opposition to the messengers of God will ultimately be futile.

Whereas in the second of the Medinan phases defined here the main thrust of passages about Jesus and Mary is polemical against *Jewish* opposition to Muḥammad, in the third phase the main thrust is critical of *Christian* beliefs, reflecting Muḥammad's increased contact with Christians in the last years of the Medinan period. It should, however, be clarified that these phases should not be understood as totally distinct in chronological terms. Rather, there is a certain amount of overlap between them. Some of the passages critical of Christian beliefs (e.g. 4: 171–2) may date from the same time as passages already examined which attack the Jews of Medina. Likewise, in the latest phase the depiction of Jesus can still serve the purpose of polemic against Jewish opponents (e.g. 5: 78). Clearly Muḥammad did not move overnight from a period of conflict with Jews to one of conflict with Christians; passages such as 9: 29–35 reveal that both could be targets of Qur'ānic polemic at the same time. Nevertheless, the phases defined here do represent a useful generalisation which conveys something of the changing audiences and issues addressed by Muḥammad. As we consider this final phase we see how the Qur'ānic portrayal of Jesus and Mary acquires a new facet. They now appear not primarily as models for Muḥammad, but rather as figures at the heart of a theological controversy. As we saw earlier (when discussing 43: 57–65), there may have been intimations of this controversy even in the Meccan period, but it is only in the later Medinan period that it really comes to the fore.

In the final years of the Medinan period it seems that there took place in Muḥammad's attitude to Christians and Christianity something akin to his earlier process of disillusionment with the Jews of Medina. The resulting attitude of hostility was born both of theological controversy and also of political and military conflict, especially with Christian tribes to the north.<sup>29</sup> At the heart of the theological controversy was disagreement over the status of Jesus (and, to a lesser extent, that of Mary).

One passage concerned with the proper status of Jesus begins by warning Christians not to “exceed the bounds” in their religion (4: 171; cf. 5: 77). This idea of “exceeding bounds” (*ghuluw*) is a good summary of what the Qur'ān sees as wrong with Christian attitudes to Jesus. The respect proper to a messenger of God has lost its moorings and drifted into idolatrous worship. This distorted understanding of Jesus needs to be corrected and there is therefore a repeated emphasis



on his humanity; he may indeed have been an extraordinary human being, with his birth of a virgin, his miracles and (on the traditional reading) his ascension to heaven without tasting death, but Jesus unambiguously belongs in the category of that which is created. So the passage cited above continues:

The Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, was only the messenger of God, and his word which he committed to Mary, and a spirit from him. So believe in God and his messengers, and do not say "Three."  
Refrain: it is better for you.

God is only one God. Glory be to him – that he should have a son! (4: 171)

The high status of Jesus is affirmed here by a string of honorific titles. Again, however, it is important not to jump to conclusions about the significance in the Qur'ān of titles applied to Jesus which also occur in the New Testament. For example, the reference to Jesus as God's "word" cannot, in the wider Qur'ānic context, be taken to imply anything resembling the pre-existent *Logos* of John's Gospel; Muslim commentators tend to see here an allusion to the divine word of command *by which Jesus was created*. What is certainly clear is that the Qur'ānic affirmations about Jesus, however striking and distinctive, are held within a clear insistence that Jesus was not God's son.<sup>30</sup>

The passage cited above goes on to observe that "the Messiah will not disdain to be a servant of God" (4: 172; cf. 19: 30); in context the implication (again in contrast to the New Testament) seems to be that servanthood and sonship of God are mutually exclusive possibilities. Elsewhere the status of Jesus as a being created out of dust is reaffirmed by a comparison of him with Adam (3: 59). Again, the normal humanity of both Jesus and Mary is emphasised by the reminder that (like other mortals) "they both ate food" (5: 75). In another passage the Qur'ānic Jesus himself speaks out to disown the errors of Christians; when questioned by God as to whether he told people to take him and Mary "as gods, apart from God," he insists: "It is not mine to say what I have no right to" (5: 116). Some kind of Christian doctrine of the Trinity is probably in mind here, as also at 5: 73, where Christians are reported as saying that "God is the third of three." The Qur'ānic rejection of the idea that Jesus could in any sense be divine obviously makes all trinitarian language about God out of the question, as we saw above: "do not say 'Three'" (4: 171).

It has been observed that some of the Qur'ānic attacks on beliefs held by Christians seem to be addressing ideas which are not normally



considered orthodox Christianity. For example, the repeated statement “God is the Messiah” (5: 17, 72) is far from being a recognised Christian formulation of the doctrine of the incarnation. Likewise a passage quoted above (5: 116) might suggest that the Qur’ān is responding to a conception of the Trinity which involved the worship of Mary as one of the three persons.<sup>31</sup> Some have therefore argued that the Qur’ān need not be thought hostile to orthodox Christianity *per se*, but only to certain distortions of it.<sup>32</sup> There is not space here for a proper assessment of such arguments, but I am inclined to the view that although we must recognise the heterodox nature of some of the Christianity which Muḥammad encountered, it is somewhat unrealistic to think that representatives of a more “mainstream” Christian theology would have received a significantly more positive response.<sup>33</sup>

### Scripture

We saw that in the Meccan period there is an assumption that the message brought by Muḥammad stands in continuity with the scriptures revealed through earlier messengers. This assumption is usually expressed in very general terms, without specifying what scriptures are in mind; we noted that there is only one specific reference to “the Book” which was given to Jesus (19: 30). At Medina this assumption continues, although now, as a result of greater actual contact with Jews and Christians, the claim is made more often, and usually rather more precisely, that the Qur’ān confirms the Torah and/or the Gospel. These earlier scriptures are understood as precursors of the Qur’ān not only in terms of their contents, but also in terms of the manner of their revelation. Thus, on the model of Muḥammad’s reception of the Qur’ān, the Gospel (singular, never plural) is seen as having been “sent down” (3: 3) or “taught” (3: 48) to Jesus; again, it is important not to impose New Testament notions of what a Gospel might be, and of how disciples might have been involved in its composition.

A succinct statement of the Qur’ān’s relationship to the Torah and Gospel is given at the beginning of *sūra* 3:

[God] has sent down upon you [Muḥammad] the Book with the truth,  
confirming what was before it,  
and he sent down the Torah and the Gospel before ... (3: 3–4)

The same history of revelation is expounded at greater length at 5: 44–50. This passage begins with the sending down of “the Torah, in which



is guidance and light" (v. 44); v. 46 describes God giving Jesus "the Gospel, in which is guidance and light, confirming the Torah before it"; finally, in v. 48, God speaks to Muḥammad of the revelation of the Qur'ān:

And we have sent down to you the Book with the truth,  
confirming the Book that was before it,  
and a guardian over it (*muhaymin 'alayhi*).

Since the status of the Qur'ān is thus bound up with its relationship to earlier scriptures, it is natural that believers are bidden to believe in the plurality of books which God has revealed (2: 285; 4: 136). However, it is important to note the emphasis placed here on the authority or "guardianship" of the Qur'ān over its scriptural precursors, which are certainly viewed positively, but only within a history of revelation which culminates in the Qur'ān.

Little is said about the actual contents of the Gospel (or of other earlier scriptures). One passage, which compares believers to a seed growing into a plant, adds that this image is present in the Torah and the Gospel (48: 29). Another passage mentions that the promise of Paradise for those who die fighting "in the way of God" is present in the Torah, the Gospel and the Qur'ān (9: 111). Perhaps most significantly 7: 157 claims that Muḥammad is written about in the Torah and the Gospel.<sup>34</sup> Again, the underlying story is of a continuity which culminates in the Qur'ān, Muḥammad and the community of his followers.

The impression given so far in this section is of the Qur'ān's affirmation of earlier scriptures, the Gospel among them. This is not, however, the whole picture. The fact that most of the Jews and Christians encountered by Muḥammad did not accept his claims about himself and his message raises a very important question: if the Qur'ān is the confirmation of the earlier scriptures, why do the Jews and Christians, who read those scriptures, not accept the Qur'ān as revelation and therefore also acknowledge Muḥammad as a prophet? This question, even though it may never be articulated explicitly in quite that form, appears to be the issue which many Medinan passages are addressing. Various answers to the problem are suggested, mainly responding specifically to the rejection of Muḥammad's message by Jews. Despite being addressed to Jews rather than Christians, such passages are nevertheless relevant to this study, both because the Torah is regarded as scripture by Christians as well as Jews and also because later Medinan passages imply that the problem is essentially the same with both Jews and Christians (e.g. 5: 13–15, 68).



The passages in question suggest a range of explanations as to why the People of the Book do not believe in the Qur'ān. Some passages suggest that the actual text of their scriptures has been tampered with. For example, in response to Jewish unbelief in Medina the Qur'ān comments:

... there is a party of them that hear God's word, and then, after they have understood it, knowingly distort it (*yuḥarrifūnahu*) ...

So woe to those who write the Book with their own hands, then say, "This is from God" ... (2: 75, 79; cf. 3: 78)

Although no precise account is given here of how (or when) such corruption of the earlier scriptures occurred, this is an accusation which at least begins to provide an explanation for the apparent discrepancy between these scriptures and the Qur'ān.<sup>35</sup> Elsewhere the Qur'ān seems to be dealing with the same problem in a different way by suggesting not that the texts of the earlier scriptures have been corrupted, but rather that the People of the Book are consciously evading the testimony in their scriptures to the truth brought by Muḥammad in the Qur'ān. This idea is vividly conveyed at 2: 101:

When there has come to them a messenger from God confirming what was with them [i.e. their scripture], a party of them that were given the Book throw the Book of God behind their backs, as if they did not know.  
(cf. 3: 187)

In similar vein, other passages speak of those who "hide" the truth in the earlier scriptures (2: 174; cf. 2: 159). Such passages seem to imply that there is nothing wrong with the Torah and the Gospel in themselves, but that the problem lies with the way in which Jews and Christians approach these scriptures. This also seems to be the sense of passages calling on Jews and Christians to "observe" or "establish" (*aqāma*) the Torah and Gospel (5: 66, 68; cf. 5: 47), an appeal which implies a positive view of these scriptures in their existing form. Further variants on this general theme include the accusation of deliberate misreading ("twisting with their tongues," 4: 46; cf. 3: 78), and the ideas that the People of the Book only have "part of the Book" (4: 44, 51), or have forgotten part of their scriptures (5: 13).

It is difficult to systematise this range of explanations into one simple account of how the Qur'ān understands the scriptures read by Jews and Christians. For now, however, it is enough to observe that in



the Medinan period the scriptures of the People of the Book are a subject about which the Qur'ān repeatedly indicates disquiet. Something has gone wrong, whether in the actual text of these scriptures or in the way they are being read, and this explains why Jews and Christians fail to acknowledge the Qur'ān as they should.

### Christians

The two preceding sections have already given some impression of the portrayal of Christians in Medinan passages. We have seen that Christians are criticised for their view of Jesus and (along with Jews) for their corruption of the Bible, or at least for their failure to respond to its true message. Much else is said by way of criticism of them in the Medinan period. Christians (like Jews) arrogantly believe that only they will enter Paradise (2: 111, 120, 135) and presumptuously call themselves "God's children" (5: 18). As in Meccan passages, Christians are associated with disunity, divided among themselves (5: 14), and disputing with the Jews (2: 113). They are opposed to the message brought by Muḥammad, seeking in vain to extinguish the light of God (9: 32–3). Some of their doctrines and practices are seen as unbelief (*kufr*) and idolatry (*shirk*) (5: 72–3; 9: 29–31), terms usually applied to outright pagans.<sup>36</sup> Monasticism is a practice which God did not command (57: 27) and Christians are accused of idolatrously taking their monks as lords (9: 31); furthermore, monks and priests are greedy for gold and silver (9: 34–5). On the practical level, Christians are not to be taken as allies (*awliyā'*) (5: 51), and they are to be fought until, humbled, they pay a special tax (*jizya*, 9: 29).

But that is not the whole picture. For example, despite the negative image of monks just mentioned, there are a number of passages which imply a warm respect for Christian monasticism (e.g. 3: 113–15; 22: 40; 5: 82; possibly 24: 36–8); God has also placed tenderness and mercy in the hearts of those who follow Jesus (57: 27). Christians are seen in a more positive light than Jews (5: 82), and it is suggested that God has set Christians in power over Jews (3: 55; 61: 14), an observation which would correspond with the political realities of the day. Social intercourse between Christians and Muslims is made possible by regulations concerning food and marriage (5: 5). Finally, and perhaps most strikingly, godly Christians are promised that they will be rewarded on the Last Day (2: 62; 5: 69).

How, then, are we to explain the co-existence of this negative and positive material on Christians? This is perhaps the hardest question with



✓ which this study has to deal.<sup>37</sup> Here I will only mention certain possible approaches, indicating some of their strengths and limitations, but not claiming to arrive at a neat resolution. Although they come from different angles, these approaches need not be totally exclusive of one another.

— One approach is to postulate the existence in Arabia of theologically distinct streams of Christianity whose adherents responded differently to Muḥammad and so are praised or criticised by the Qur'ān accordingly.<sup>38</sup> There may well be some truth in this approach, although it is necessarily somewhat speculative because of the difficulty involved in reconstructing exactly what kinds of Christians were encountered by Muḥammad.

— Another approach would emphasise the chronological progression in Muḥammad's attitude to Christians. Waardenburg, for example, writes of the "remarkable change in [Muḥammad's] attitude toward the Christians and Christianity" in the latter part of the Medinan period.<sup>39</sup> Likewise, Caspar suggests that in Muḥammad's relations with both Jews and Christians there is, on different timescales, a progression from sympathy to conflict to "rupture," the total breakdown of relations.<sup>40</sup> In general terms, this seems undeniable; it is an analysis which also fits with the progression of thought outlined in the section on Jesus and Mary in Medinan passages, in which hostility to Christian doctrines is much more pronounced in the later Medinan period. However, it would be very difficult to date all positive verses about Christians as early Medinan and all hostile verses as late, so although we can recognise a broad trend from positive to negative attitudes, it may be necessary to think of different attitudes to Christians overlapping with one another to some extent.<sup>41</sup>

Another approach would argue that much or even all of the Medinan material which appears positive about Christians in fact refers specifically to Christians who are at some stage in the process of acknowledging the divine origin of the Qur'ān and joining the community of Muḥammad's followers.<sup>42</sup> This argument can appeal to texts such as 5: 82–5, which begins with positive comments about Christian priests and monks (5: 82), but then continues with this account of their reception of the Qur'ān:

And when they hear what has been sent down to the messenger  
you see their eyes overflow with tears because of the truth they  
recognise.

They say: "Our Lord, we believe; so write us down among the  
witnesses." (5: 83)



3: 199 is another passage in which the Qur'ān praises members of the People of the Book who believe in what has been revealed to Muḥammad. One could argue that such passages make explicit what is assumed throughout the Qur'ānic appeal to Christians, namely that the proper response of Christians to the Qur'ān is to acknowledge it as divine revelation and so become part of the Muslim community.<sup>43</sup> This approach suggests that behind the apparently conflicting positive and negative material on Christians there is a coherent Qur'ānic attitude: on the assumption that they are ready to believe in the Qur'ān, Christians are seen positively; where they disappoint that expectation, they are seen negatively. This approach has in its favour that it does full justice to what must be taken as a datum central to this enquiry, the fact that, as Khoury puts it: "The Qur'ānic polemic against Jews and Christians concentrates above all on the question of the acknowledgement of Muḥammad's prophetic mission and the genuineness of the Qur'ānic revelation."<sup>44</sup>

However, there are passages which do not fit easily with this approach. For example, the following verse, much quoted by those keen to establish a pluralistic understanding of Islam, appears to promise entry into Paradise not only for Muslims but also for godly Christians and other non-Muslims, and without obviously demanding their "conversion":

Surely those that believe, and the Jews, and the Christians,  
and the Sabaeans, whoever believes in God and the Last Day,  
and does righteous deeds – their wage awaits them with their Lord,  
and no fear shall be on them, neither shall they sorrow. (2: 62; cf. 5: 69)

This verse certainly causes problems for the argument that it is only Christians who come to believe in Muḥammad and the Qur'ān who are seen positively. On the other hand, one must also question the approach of those who interpret verses such as 2: 62 and 5: 69 in isolation from their wider context. In both *sūras* 2 and 5 the wider concern is emphatically that the People of the Book should believe in the Qur'ān; the general impression given is certainly that "a Christianity not regarded as a harbinger of ... Muḥammad [is] not an acceptable creed in spite of its monotheistic foundation."<sup>45</sup> If this leaves us, as I said, without a neat resolution, that indicates the need for further study of this complex question, always bearing in mind that too neat a resolution might falsify some aspect of Muḥammad's evolving relationship with various Christians over a significant number of years.



## CONCLUSION

As well as leaving certain questions unresolved, this chapter has left many questions largely untouched. As mentioned above, I have not explored the question of the sources of Muḥammad's knowledge of Christianity. I have also chosen neither to discuss the enigmatic Arabic version of the name of Jesus in the Qur'ān (*ʿIsa*), nor to comment in any detail on the significance of the various titles applied to him by the Qur'ān, nor to put together what one can of a "life of Jesus" from the Qur'ānic material. I have given little space to what might be thought crucial topics such as whether or not the Qur'ān teaches that Jesus died.<sup>46</sup> Such questions are of obvious significance to Christians; my concern, however, has been not so much to consider the questions which Christians may want answered about the Qur'ān, but rather to seek to understand the material on Christianity as it takes its place within the wider concerns of the Qur'ān. I hope that this chapter has shown that what the Qur'ān says about Jesus and Mary, the Bible and Christians is not an odd hotchpotch of narratives and other fragments, but rather makes very good sense within the patterns of the Qur'ānic understanding of God and humanity and against the backdrop of Muḥammad's developing relationship with the various groups which he addresses.

One way of summarising what has emerged from this study is to speak of the relationship between the *ideal* Christianity conceived of by Muḥammad and the *actual* Christianity which he encountered. This distinction is made well by Rahman:

From the very start of his Call, the Prophet was convinced that his message was a continuation or, indeed, a revival of the earlier Prophets ... This attitude is, however, on a purely theoretical or ideal religious plane and has no reference to the *actual* doctrine and practice of the "People of the Book" and the two must be distinguished.<sup>47</sup>

At the heart of the Qur'ān there is a vision of religious history which includes an ideal form of Christianity. This consists of a Jesus and a Mary who are precursors of Muḥammad; a scripture which is a precursor of the Qur'ān; and Christians who are precursors of the followers of Muḥammad. Initially, this ideal understanding of Christianity is not greatly challenged, but gradually the ideal collides with the actual. The ideal of a Christianity which must find its proper goal in Muḥammad and the Qur'ān runs up against the actual forms of Christianity adhered to by the Christians encountered by Muḥammad.



Their failure to acknowledge Muḥammad and the Qur'ān reveals that such Christians are distortions of what followers of Jesus should be; that they hold a distorted understanding of Jesus and Mary; and that they have distorted the scripture brought by Jesus.

Christians hoping to understand how they and their faith appear to Muslims today may helpfully reflect on this relationship between the ideal and the actual in the Qur'ānic understanding of Christianity. They will find that in a range of different ways the ideal and the actual serve as lenses through which Christians and Christianity continue to be viewed. To varying degrees Christians will find themselves affirmed as "People of the Book," somehow connected to the ideal, the true religion. But to varying degrees they will also find their actual beliefs and practices regarded as distortions of what they should be.

## NOTES

- 1 This approach implies a certain understanding of the relationship between Muḥammad and the Qur'ān. I take the Qur'ān as a reliable record of Muḥammad's preaching during the period 609–32 CE. I also accept, in broad outline, the account of Muḥammad's life during this period which is given by the traditional Islamic sources. It should be acknowledged that this approach is questioned by a number of Western scholars. For an introduction to some of the writers and issues involved in this debate see the "Excursus on Islamic Origins" in David Waines, *An Introduction to Islam* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) pp. 265–79. For further comments on the sense in which I take the Qur'ān as a historical source, and for a discussion of the approach assumed here to the dating of Qur'ānic passages, see chapter one of my study *God, Muhammad and the Unbelievers* (London: Curzon Press, 1999). ✓
- 2 It is a comment on the need to be alert to one's presuppositions that I first defined this category simply as "Jesus." However, after further reflection on the Qur'ānic material I revised this to "Jesus and Mary" because, in contrast to the New Testament, the Qur'ān devotes not much less attention to Mary than it does to Jesus. Furthermore, the relationship between Jesus and Mary is constantly alluded to in the Qur'ān due to its repeated reference to Jesus as "the son of Mary."
- 3 These narratives are analysed in chapter three of my study *God, Muhammad and the Unbelievers*.
- 4 Translations from the Qur'ān are my own, but are based on Arthur J. Arberry, *The Koran Interpreted* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964). However, the system of verse-numbering used here is that of the Egyptian official edition, which is followed by most recent translations but *not* by Arberry.
- 5 There is not space in this context to pursue the question of the sources of Qur'ānic narratives such as this, a question, incidentally, which is ✓



incompatible with traditional Muslim understandings of the inspiration of the Qur'ān. Sources are discussed in works such as D. Sidersky, *Les Origines des Légendes Musulmanes dans le Coran et dans les Vies des Prophètes* (Paris: Librairie Orientaliste Paul Geuthner, 1933), and Heinrich Speyer, *Die Biblischen Erzählungen im Qoran* (Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag, 1971).

- ✓ 6 For further parallels between Muḥammad and Mary, see Neal Robinson, "Jesus and Mary in the Qur'an: Some Neglected Affinities," *Religion* 20 (1990), pp. 161–75.
- ✓ 7 See Heikki Räisänen's comments on p. 126 of "The Portrait of Jesus in the Qur'ān: Reflections of a Biblical Scholar," *The Muslim World* 70 (1980), pp. 122–33.
- 8 In the Qur'ān Jesus is described both as a prophet (*nabī*), as here, and as a messenger (*rasūl*, e.g. 3: 49; 5: 75; 61: 6). On the relationship between these two terms see W. M. Watt and R. Bell, *Introduction to the Qur'an* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1970), pp. 28–9. For a survey of the titles of Jesus in the Qur'ān see Geoffrey Parrinder, *Jesus in the Qur'an* (London: Faber and Faber, 1965), chapter four.
- 9 This is one reading of a famously obscure passage which Arberry translates "It is knowledge of the hour," with the reference of "it" unspecified. Paret supports the reading I have given; see Rudi Paret, *Der Koran: Kommentar und Konkordanz* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1989) fourth edition, ad loc. Eschatological significance also seems to attach to Jesus in a Medinan passage (4: 159).
- ✓ 10 See F. Buhl's discussion of the question "When did Muḥammad begin to criticise Christianity?," pp. 106–8 of "Zur Kuranexegese," *Acta Orientalia* 3, 1924, pp. 97–108.
- 11 For the former interpretation see Paret, *Kommentar*, ad loc; for the latter see Richard Bell, *A Commentary on the Qur'an* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1991) ad loc.
- 12 7: 157, which refers to the *injīl* (Gospel), is very probably Medinan; all other references to the *injīl* are definitely Medinan.
- 13 W. Montgomery Watt, *Muhammad at Mecca* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1953) p. 27. For a contrasting view see Fazlur Rahman's *Major Themes of the Qur'ān* (Minneapolis: Bibliotheca Islamica, 1989 (second edition)), chapter eight and the two appendices.
- 14 Richard Bell, *The Origin of Islam in its Christian Environment* (London: Macmillan, 1926) p. 147.
- 15 Others have seen the passage as depicting an eschatological scene. Watt defends the reading given above in his article "The Men of the Ukhdūd" in William Montgomery Watt, *Early Islam* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1990) pp. 54–6.
- 16 Bell, *Commentary*, ad loc. See also Paret's article on "aṣḥāb al-kahf" in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam* (second edition).
- 17 See Bell, *Commentary*, ad loc.
- 18 See William Montgomery Watt, *Companion to the Qur'ān* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1994) ad loc.
- 19 6: 20 has often been taken as a Medinan insertion into a Meccan *sūra* (e.g. *Tafsīr al-Jalālayn*, a traditional mediaeval commentary). The presence of



- Medinan parallels in *sūra* 2 (particularly at v. 146, and also, to some extent, at vv. 89 and 144) might seem to bolster this argument. However, a Meccan origin for 6: 20 and 6: 114 is suggested by the contrasting ways in which *sūras* 6 and 2 apply the claim that the People of the Book recognise the Qur'ān/Muḥammad "as they recognise their sons." In *sūra* 6 this claim appears to be contrasted with the unbelief of the Meccan idolaters; the People of the Book are thus presented positively as witnesses in support of Muḥammad. In *sūra* 2, however, the fact that the People of the Book can see the truth about Muḥammad and the Qur'ān is set within a context of polemic against their refusal to acknowledge Muḥammad. The emphasis is on how perverse they are in their conscious evasion of the truth. The different use of the same image in these two different contexts is thus an illuminating comment on both the continuity in Muḥammad's fundamental assumptions about the People of the Book and also the disappointment he experienced in his actual encounters with them.
- 20 See *Major Themes*, e.g. p. 137.
  - 21 See Buhl, "Zur Kuranexegese," pp. 106–8. Such anti-Christian polemic is explicit at 19: 34–5, the sequel to the narrative about the birth of Jesus. There are, however, strong stylistic grounds for believing that these verses are a later addition (see Paret, *Kommentar*, ad loc; Bell, *Commentary*, ad loc).
  - 22 Readers of the New Testament will be familiar with the importance of the question "Who are the true descendants of Abraham?" See especially Paul's letters to the Romans and the Galatians.
  - 23 Another interesting parallel between the experience of Muḥammad and Jesus is suggested in the description of the plotting of the Jews against Jesus: "and they schemed, and God schemed, and God is the best of schemers" (v. 54). Almost exactly the same words are used of Muḥammad's experience at 8: 30, admittedly referring in that context not to Muḥammad's conflict with the Jews but to God's deliverance of him from the murderous plots of the Meccans.
  - 24 The passage immediately following this long narrative section (3: 59–64) is a polemic against Christian ideas about Jesus and is traditionally believed to date from very late in the Medinan period when Muḥammad argued with a deputation of Christians from Najrān (see Muhammad Asad, *The Message of the Qur'an* (Gibraltar: Dar al-Andalus, 1980) n. 48, p. 76; Bell, (*Commentary*, ad loc.) also suggests a later date.
  - 25 Watt notes that "Aḥmad was not given as a name to Muslim children until a hundred years after the Hijra" (*Companion*, ad loc.), and elsewhere argues at greater length that at 61: 6 "*aḥmad*" should be taken as a comparative adjective (see his article "His Name is Aḥmad" in *Early Islam*, pp. 43–50).
  - 26 For details see chapters 12 and 13 of Neal Robinson, *Christ in Islam and Christianity* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1991).
  - 27 See Parrinder, *Jesus in the Qur'ān*, chapter 11, especially pp. 119–21.
  - 28 Cf. David Marshall, "The Resurrection of Jesus and the Qur'an," in Gavin D'Costa (ed.), *Resurrection Reconsidered* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1996), pp. 171–5 and Jacques Jomier, *Bible et Coran* (Paris: Les Editions du Cerf, 1959), pp. 115–16.



- 29 See W. Montgomery Watt, *Muhammad at Medina* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956), pp. 318–20; cf. Jacques Waardenburg, “Towards the Periodization of Earliest Islam according to its Relations with Other Religions,” in Rudolph Peters (ed.), *Proceedings of the Ninth Congress of the Union Européenne des Arabisants et Islamisants* (Leiden: Brill), pp. 312–17.
- 30 The word translated as “son” at 4: 171 (*walad*) has associations with physical procreation. Disgust with the implications that this would have for understanding God may account in part for the Qur’ānic rejection of Christian beliefs about Jesus. Not too much weight should be placed on this argument, however, since in another passage attacking Christian beliefs equally emphatically (9:30) the Arabic for “son of God” (*ibn allāh*) does not have quite the same associations.
- 31 For examples of some such forms of Christian belief which may have been present in seventh century Arabia see Parrinder, *Jesus in the Qur’ān*, chapter 14.
- 32 See R. C. Zaehner, “The Qur’an and Christ,” an appendix to *At Sundry Times: an Essay in the Comparison of Religions* (London: Faber and Faber, 1958), pp. 195–217, and Watt, “The Christianity Criticised in the Qur’an,” in *Early Islam*, pp. 66–70. For a different angle (which, however, does not deal with the Qur’ān itself in any detail) see Adolfo
- ✓ Gonzalez Montes, “The Challenge of Islamic Monotheism: a Christian View” in *Concilium* 1994/3, pp. 67–75.
- 33 See Fazlur Rahman, *Islam* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1966), p. 26.
- 34 The Qur’ān does not itself elaborate on this claim. However, Muslims have been particularly impressed by Deuteronomy 18: 15–18, which speaks of God raising up a prophet like Moses, and Jesus’ promise in John 14 of the coming of the “Paraclete.” Both these passages, as well as many others, are seen as referring to Muḥammad.
- 35 The Islamic exegetical tradition gave much attention to thinking through the implications of such passages; this led to various understandings of *tahrīf*, the corruption of the Torah and the Gospel. For more on this topic see the article on “tahrif” in the *Encyclopedia of Islam* (second edition).
- 36 Ahmad Von Denffer distinguishes between the theological, legal and societal aspects of the Qur’ānic view of Christians. In theological terms Christians are “kuffār” (unbelievers), and therefore implicitly on a level with pagans. In legal and societal terms, however, they are to be distinguished from other unbelievers (*Christians in the Qur’an and Sunna* (Leicester: Islamic Foundation, 1979) pp. 32–41). Toshihiko Izutsu makes a similar point, observing that although there is a complexity to the relationship between the People of the Book and the *umma*, ultimately the opposition between them is as great as that between the *umma* and pagans (*God and Man in the Koran*, Tokyo: The Keio Institute of Cultural and Linguistic Studies, 1964, p. 81).
- 37 See Faruq Sherif’s candid acknowledgement of this difficulty in *A Guide to the Contents of the Qur’ān*, (Reading: Garnet, 1995), pp. 130–7, where he also gives a useful survey of the relevant material.
- 38 See, for example, Rahman, *Islam*, pp. 26–7.



- 39 Waardenburg, "Periodization," p. 312.
- 40 Robert Caspar, *Traité de Théologie Musulmane* [Tome 1] (Rome: PISAI, 1987), pp. 49–53.
- 41 Caspar himself acknowledges this, suggesting that the overlapping may reflect encounter with different Christian groups (*ibid.*, p. 52).
- 42 Jane Dammen McAuliffe's study *Qur'ānic Christians* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991) illustrates that this is the mainstream approach of the Classical Qur'ān-commentaries.
- 43 Note should be taken, however, of the suggestion by Mahmoud Ayoub that the Qur'ān envisages Christians who remain Christians while at the same time believing in the Qur'ān and Muḥammad. He writes that certain Qur'ānic verses "confirm the People of the Book in their own religious identities and expect from them no more than the recognition of Muḥammad as a Messenger of God and of the Qur'ān as a genuine divine revelation confirming their own Scriptures" ("Nearest in Amity: Christians in the Qur'ān and Contemporary Exegetical Tradition," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, Vol. 8, No. 2, 1997, p. 158, cf. p. 155). For this intriguing argument to gain serious credibility as an attempt to understand the Qur'ān in its original context (rather than, primarily, as a proposal for contemporary Muslim-Christian relations) many further questions would need to be addressed. For example, it is not immediately clear how the religious identity of such Christians would differ from that of Muslims: so what would it mean to continue to call them Christians? It should also be kept in mind that, as Ayoub frankly acknowledges, his concern for interfaith relations today leads him to a deliberately selective reading of the Qur'ānic material (*ibid.*, p. 162).
- 44 Adel Theodor Khoury, *Toleranz im Islam* [second edition] (Altenberge: Christlich-Islamisches Schrifttum, 1986), p. 52. See also Willem A. Bijlefeld's argument that the decisive issue determining the Qur'ānic judgement on Jews and Christians is their response to the Qur'ān itself. See his "Some Recent Contributions to Qur'ānic Studies: Selected Publications in English, French and German, 1964–1973," *The Muslim World* 64 (1974), pp. 94–5.
- 45 Sherif, *Contents*, p. 137.
- 46 As well as Parrinder's *Jesus in the Qur'ān*, see G. C. Anawati's article on ('Isa) in the *Encyclopaedia of Islam* (second edition) for useful surveys of such matters.
- 47 Rahman, *Islam*, p. 26 (his italics).