

## Jesus: More Than a Prophet? (Part 1)

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Jesus of Nazareth is, of course, at the heart of the New Testament. He also occupies an important place in the Qur'an. Both books attribute to him the title of prophet. Isa, the Quranic version of the name Jesus, appears 25 times in the Qur'an, not counting the passages that use other terms to refer to him. The importance of Jesus, both for Christians and for Muslims, is undeniable. But would it be right to elevate Jesus in importance so that he would be above God's other prophets? Why should he receive more attention than all the others?

### THE COMING OF JESUS WAS PROPHESED

One of the first things that strike us concerning Jesus is the fact that his coming had been predicted by God's other prophets, not just once or in a vague or doubtful manner, but clearly and in many different writings. The Jewish people did not understand very well the character of the Messiah and of the work that God would have him do, but certain things were clear for them, as we see in Matthew 2:1-6, which says:

"Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, saying, 'Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the East and have come to worship Him.'

When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born.

So they said to him, 'In Bethlehem of Judea, for thus it is written by the prophet: "But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are not the least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you shall come a Ruler Who will shepherd My people Israel.'"

The passage to which the priests and scribes referred is found in the book of the prophet Micah and was written 700 years before the birth of Jesus!

The miraculous nature of the birth of Jesus had also been predicted. It was the prophet Isaiah who had announced that a virgin would be found with

child (or pregnant) and would give birth to a son who would be called Emmanuel, one of the names that have always been used for Jesus. This prophecy dates from the eighth century before Christ (Isaiah 7:14).

Jesus was famous for the extraordinary miracles that he did. The prophets had spoken of them well ahead of time. In Isaiah 35:4b-6 we read, "He will come and save you. Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped. Then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the dumb sing." After having been put in prison by Herod, John the Baptist wondered if he had been mistaken about Jesus. If the Messiah were here, how could John be subjected to so great an injustice for having preached the truth? So he sent messengers to ask Jesus if he really was the one they were expecting. "Jesus answered and said to them, 'Go and tell John the things which you hear and see: The blind see and the lame walk; the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear; the dead are raised up and the poor have the gospel preached to them. And blessed is he who is not offended because of Me'" (Matthew 11:4-6). John had asked Jesus if he was truly the one who people knew was supposed to come. Jesus pointed out the miracles that he was doing and which were the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy about the one who was to come.

When it comes to the death of Jesus, the prophecies about him are even more numerous. It was announced in advance that he would enter Jerusalem seated on a donkey, that he would be betrayed by one friend and abandoned by the others, that his hands and feet would be pierced, that people would cast lots to divide up his clothes, that he would be thirsty and be given vinegar to drink, that his bones would not be broken but that his side would be pierced. The prophets even predicted the exact words that the mockers would use to ridicule him: "He trusted in the Lord, let Him rescue Him; let Him deliver Him, since He delights in Him!" (Psalm 22:8; Matthew 27:43). The prophet Zachariah wrote the following about four centuries before the death of Jesus, "So they weighed out for my wages thirty

pieces of silver. And the Lord said to me, 'Throw it to the potter'—that princely price they set on me. So I took the thirty pieces of silver and threw them into the house of the Lord for the potter" (Zachariah 11:12,13). Those who are already familiar with the story know that Judas, the one who betrayed Jesus, had received exactly thirty pieces of silver for having given to the enemies of the Lord the information they wanted so that they could arrest Jesus far from the crowds. But when Judas saw how things took place following this betrayal, he was filled with remorse. The Bible says that Judas took the thirty pieces of silver back and threw them in the temple before going out to hang himself. The chief priests gathered up the money and used it to buy a potter's field to serve as a cemetery for the burial of foreigners (Matthew 27:3-7).

In chapter 53 of the book of the prophet Isaiah, we find that the Messiah would be despised by men, acquainted with grief and rejected by his own people, but also that he would be punished for the sins of others, that he would intercede for the guilty, that he would be numbered with the transgressors, that his tomb would be with the rich and that he would be raised from the dead.

### THE MINISTRY OF JOHN THE BAPTIST

In addition to all these prophecies, God sent a special messenger just to announce the arrival of Jesus. The Qur'an recognizes this individual as a prophet, a man of integrity, a man who spoke the truth to the people. This messenger, whom the Bible calls John and whom Muslims know by the name of Yahya, identified himself simply as a voice, the voice of someone who cried: "Make straight the way of the Lord" (John 1:23). Let us say in passing that even this aspect of the life of Jesus had been prophesied. Malachi, the last book of the Old Testament, contains the prediction that God would send his messenger in order to open up the way by calling the people to repentance (Malachi 3:1). When a head of state is to go somewhere, it is customary to send people ahead of time so that he may be welcomed in a manner worthy of his dignity. This is what John was doing for Jesus, the king who was coming to bring a blessing to some and judgment to others. The Gospel of Luke 3:15-17 says:

"Now as the people were in expectation, and all reasoned in their hearts about John, whether he was the Christ or not, John answered, saying to all, 'I indeed baptize you with water; but One mightier than I is coming, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to loose. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fan is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clean out His threshing floor, and gather the wheat into His barn; but the chaff He will burn with unquenchable fire.'"

When Jesus came to be baptized, John told the crowd, "Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! This is He of whom I said, 'After me comes a Man who is preferred before me, for He was before me'" (John 1:29,30). John's mission was to prepare the people to receive in a worthy manner the prophet who was to follow him: Jesus.

Just the preparation for the coming of Jesus has to impress us deeply. His life and his works will do so even more.

### A LIFE WITHOUT SIN

Several passages in the Bible emphasize the idea that Jesus did not sin. In 2 Corinthians 5:21 the apostle Paul wrote, "Christ had no sin, but God made him become sin so that in Christ we could be right with God." The apostle Peter, also, upheld the same truth: "He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth" (1 Peter 1:22). Peter quotes here a word from the prophet Isaiah concerning the Christ: "And they made His grave with the wicked—but with the rich at His death, because He had done no violence, nor was any deceit in His mouth" (Isaiah 53:9). But it was not only other people who claimed that Jesus had no sin. Jesus himself challenged his opponents by saying, "Which of you convicts Me of sin? And if I tell the truth, why do you not believe me?" (John 8:46).

Muhammad did not try to prove that Jesus had committed sin. To the contrary, we see in Surah 19, aya 19 of the Qur'an that the angel said to Mary, "I am only a Messenger from your Lord, (to announce) to you the gift of a righteous son." One of the Muslim commentators, by the name of Er-Razi, says that the title of Messiah was given to Jesus because he was free from the stain of sin. Oddly,

this state of purity is not attributed to any other prophet in the Qur'an. In the Bible we see the weaknesses and sometimes even the sins of the other prophets. Adam ate the forbidden fruit; Noah got drunk; Abraham lied; Jacob deceived his father; David committed adultery; Solomon worshipped his wives' idols. Even Muhammad recognized that he had sin in his life. More than one verse in the Qur'an exhorts him to beg for the forgiveness of his sin. The 48<sup>th</sup> Surah begins with these words, which Allah addresses to Muhammad: "Verily, We have given you (O Muhammad) a manifest victory. That Allah may forgive you your sins of the past and the future, and complete His Favour on you, and guide

you on the Straight Path." In addition, Muhammad himself admitted that he did not know his eternal destiny. "Say (O Muhammad): 'I am not a new thing among the Messengers (of Allah) nor do I know what will be done with me or with you. I only follow that which is revealed to me, and I am but a plain warner'" (46:9).

The apostle John said, "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us" (1 John 1:8). But this same John said about Jesus: "In Him there is no sin" (1 John 3:5). There can be no doubt that Jesus is clearly different from all the others whom men have recognized as prophets.