

1 Jesus in the Qur'ān

INTRODUCTION

The Qur'ān, which is comparable in length to the New Testament, is said to have been revealed piecemeal to the Prophet Muḥammad over a period of about twenty-three years. For ten years after the onset of the revelations Muḥammad continued to live in his native Mecca which was an important commercial centre controlling the caravan route between southern Arabia and Syria. Then, because of mounting opposition, he and his followers emigrated to Yathrib, a large oasis which is about 250 miles to the north and which is now known as Medina. The Emigration or *hijra* took place in 622 CE and marks the beginning of the Muslim era.¹

According to Muslim tradition, when Muḥammad died the whole of the revelation was available on loose writing materials and had also been committed to memory by the Companions. Within a few years several of the Companions, including the first Caliph Abū Bakr, produced written editions of the Qur'ān for their personal use. A standard edition was promulgated by the fourth Caliph 'Uthmān (d.35/656). Subsequently various orthographic improvements were made but the content, order and divisions of the text have remained unchanged.²

In printed editions of the Qur'ān the text is divided into *ṣūras* and *āyas*.³ In order to appreciate Islam's relationship to Judaism and Christianity there is no substitute for reading through all one hundred and fourteen *ṣūras*. They abound in references to God, creation, the Jewish prophets and the forthcoming judgement and resurrection. The following list is limited in scope. It comprises all the passages which explicitly mention Jesus (*'Īsā*), Christians (*Naṣārā*) or the Gospel (*Injīl*) together with a few others which may allude to them. It does not include all the references to the Jews or to 'the People of the Scripture', an expression which can denote both Jews and Christians:

2:26,62,87,111-141,253 // 3:1-84,113-5 // 4:44-57,142,156-75 //
5:14-18,46-120 // 6:84-90,106 // 7:40-9,156-9,179,186 //
9:29-35,80,111-114 // 10:68 // 16:103 // 18:9-26 // 19:1-40,92f. //
21:74-94 // 22:17 // 23:45-55 // 24:34-40 // 33:7-27 // 36:13-32 //
39:4,29 // 42:13-6 // 43:57-65,81 // 44:14 // 48:29 // 57:12-13,25-29 //
58:7 // 61:1-14 // 66:1-12 // 85:1-9 // 98:1-8 // 105:1-5 // 112.

If we concentrate more narrowly on the references to Jesus and piece them together we will obtain the following composite picture.

THE QUR'ANIC JESUS: A COMPOSITE PICTURE

The story of Jesus is told at some length with particular stress on the background to his birth. Before Mary was born, her mother, the wife of 'Imrān, vowed that the child would be a consecrated offering to God. She was distressed at giving birth to a girl but sought God's protection from Satan for her and her offspring. God accepted her and when she had grown up Zechariah was chosen by lot to be her guardian. Whenever Zechariah went into the sanctuary where Mary lived he found that she had food which she claimed had been supplied by God (3:33-7,44).

There are two accounts of Zechariah's asking God to provide him with an heir and of his incredulity when told that despite his advanced age and his wife's barrenness he would have a son (3:38-41 and 19:2-15). The details about Zechariah and his son John need not concern us. Suffice it to note that in one version it is stated that John would believe in a word from God (3:39) and that in the other version it seems to be implied the name John had not previously been bestowed on anyone (19:7).

The annunciation to Mary is also related twice. It occurred when she had withdrawn in an easterly direction and was concealed by a curtain or screen. Mary was told that God had chosen her and made her pure and preferred her above all the women of creation. She was given good tidings of a word from God whose name was the Messiah Jesus Son of Mary; he would be illustrious in the world and in the hereafter and was one of those brought near. In one version the news is said to have been announced by the angels whereas in the other version there is reference to God's Spirit who took the form of a perfect man and who reassured her that he was only a messenger sent from her Lord in order to bestow on her a pure boy. Mary asked how she could have a son since she had not been unchaste. According to one version she received the reply that God creates what He wills by simply decreeing it. According to the other version she was told that it was easy for God and that he would be made a sign for mankind, a mercy from God and a thing ordained (3:42-47, 19:16-22). In neither account of the annunciation are we told any more about how the conception occurred but elsewhere there are two brief allusions to

God breathing into Mary of His Spirit (21:91, 66:12).

When Mary conceived she withdrew to a distant place. She was driven by the pangs of childbirth to the trunk of a palm tree and she wished that she were dead and forgotten. A voice told her not to grieve but to drink from the rivulet which her Lord had placed beneath there and to eat the ripe dates which would fall upon her when she shook the tree (19:22–25 cf. 23:50). Mary was instructed not to speak to anyone. She then brought the child to her own folk who expressed their stunned amazement addressing her as 'Sister of Aaron' and exclaiming that her father had not been a wicked man nor had her mother been a whore. She pointed to the infant and he spoke to them in her defence asserting that he was God's servant, that God had given him the Scripture and had appointed him a prophet. He said that God had made him blessed wheresoever he was and had enjoined upon him prayer and alms-giving for the duration of his life. Finally he declared that peace was upon him on the day of his birth, the day of his death and the day of his being raised to life (19:26–33).

Little is said about Jesus' teaching although at the annunciation Mary was told that he was destined to speak to mankind in the cradle and also when of mature age (3:46). To perform his task he was strengthened by the Holy Spirit and given signs (5:110, 2:87) and God taught him the Scripture and Wisdom and the Torah and the Gospel (3:48, 5:110). Jesus attested the truth of what was in the Torah (3:50, 5:46, 61:6). He made lawful some of the things that were forbidden to the Children of Israel in his day (3:50 cf. 3:93). He came to them with wisdom and made plain to them some of the things about which they were in disagreement (43:63). He enjoined on them fear of God and obedience to himself and the main thrust of his message was that God was his Lord and their Lord and that to worship God was the straight path (3:50f, cf. 5:72, 117, 19:36, 43:64). He warned them that paradise was forbidden to those who ascribe partners to God (5:72) and he cursed those of the Children of Israel who went astray (5:78). The religion which he was sent to establish was that of Noah, Abraham, Moses and subsequently of Muḥammad himself (33:7, 42:13). The Gospel which was bestowed upon him contained guidance light and admonition (5:46). It compared worshippers to seed which shoots up delighting the sowers (48:29). Like the Torah which it confirmed and the Qur'ān which was revealed after it, it contained God's promise of paradise to those who gave their lives fighting in God's cause (9:111). It also mentioned the coming of an unlettered prophet (7:157). Jesus himself brought good tidings of one whose

name would be *Aḥmad* (or 'more highly praised')⁴ (61:6). He summoned his own disciples to be 'helpers' in God's cause and they described themselves as those who were 'submitted' and who 'bore witness' (3:52f., 5:111, 61:14).

The signs which Jesus performed by divine permission are listed twice. First, at the annunciation Mary was told that he would be a messenger to the Children of Israel. As a sign for them from their Lord he would fashion a bird from clay which would become a real bird when he breathed into it, he would heal the blind from birth and the leper, he would raise the dead and he would announce to them what they ate and what they stored in their houses (3:49). The second list is given in retrospect when God reminds Jesus of his favour towards him and his mother. The list is very similar to the first one but it lacks the reference to Jesus' clairvoyance. Moreover in reminding Jesus of his favour God adds that He restrained the Children of Israel from him when the unbelievers among them reacted to his coming to them with clear proofs by accusing him of sorcery (5:110, cf. 61:6) Appended to the second list is an account of how the disciples asked Jesus whether his Lord was able to send down a table spread with food for them to eat so that they might know for certain that he had spoken the truth. Jesus asked God to send it down as a feast for the first of them and the last of them and as a sign. God answered that He would send it down and that after that He would punish in an unprecedented way any who disbelieved (5:112–115).

The references to the end of Jesus' earthly existence are some of the most puzzling. The unbelievers schemed and God schemed, and God is the best of schemers. God told Jesus that He purposed to 'receive him' (or 'cause him to die?'), raise him to Himself and purify him from those who disbelieved (3:54f, cf. 5:117). The People of the Scripture, who were guilty of speaking a tremendous calumny against Mary, also said that they slew the Messiah Jesus Son of Mary whereas they did not slay him or crucify him but it appeared so to them. God raised him to Himself and moreover there is not one of them who will not believe in him before his death and on the day of resurrection he will be a witness against them (4:156–9). Finally there may be an oblique reference to Jesus' future return as being indicative of the approaching hour of judgement (43:61).

Jesus' name occurs in lists of prophets whom God inspired (4:163) who were of the righteous (6:85) and with whom God took a solemn covenant (33:7). It is asserted that the Messiah Jesus son of Mary was only a messenger of God, His word which He conveyed to Mary and

a spirit from Him (4:171). He was like Adam whom God created from dust and whom God commanded into being (3:59). He was a servant on whom God bestowed his favour and made a pattern for the Children of Israel (43:59, cf. 4:172, 19:30). God constituted him and his mother a sign (23:50). Yet he was only a messenger and there had been messengers who passed away before him. His mother was a saintly woman but they were both mortals who ate food (5:75). If God had wished to destroy him and his mother with everyone else on earth none could have hindered Him (5:17). When challenged by God, Jesus denies that he told mankind to take him and his mother as two additional deities: he pleads that God knows what is in his mind but that he does not know what is in God's mind (5:116). Christians should not exaggerate in their religion nor say anything about God other than the truth. They should cease saying 'three'; they wrongly call Jesus Son of God for God is far above taking a son (4:171, cf. 9:30 etc.) Those who say that God is the Messiah son of Mary or that God is the third of three are indeed disbelievers (5:72f).

DISCUSSION

The above summary is only an initial approximation. It is of limited value for at least four reasons. First, it is inevitably coloured by decisions about the translation and interpretation of the passages on which it draws. Second, although most of the Qur'anic references to Jesus have been taken into account, the material which refers to Christians or has a bearing on their beliefs is much more extensive. Third, no attention has been paid to the order in which the material was revealed and to the possibility that the Qur'anic representation of Jesus developed and changed with the passage of time. Fourth, the summary ignores the form of the revelations and might therefore give the misleading impression that the Qur'ān is little more than a collection of propositional statements.⁵ I shall attempt to compensate for these deficiencies in later chapters. Nevertheless the summary as it stands will furnish us with an adequate basis on which to examine the responses of Christian polemicists and apologists.