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BOOK REVIEW: *ISLAM'S JESUS*

Iman Zayied*

Islam's Jesus, Zeki Saritoprak, Gainesville Florida, University Press of Florida, 2014, pp. 222, \$19.95, 978-0-8130-6178-8

Historically, Muslims and Christians have maintained contrasting views on the nature, message and role of Jesus. However, in recent times, there has been a shift in acknowledging the commonalities present within both faiths. *Islam's Jesus* takes this further as it illuminates Islam's rich theological engagement with the figure of Jesus to establish a common ground for interfaith dialogue with Christians. Zeki Saritoprak,¹ the author of *Islam's Jesus*,² identifies the often forgotten eschatological role of Jesus for Muslims and Christians can be used as a common ground for interfaith dialogue. Through analysis and focus on the similarities between Muslims and Christians, he argues that Jesus can be one of the major sources for promoting interfaith relations and understanding by adherents of Islam and Christianity, and lays down the foundations critical in encouraging interfaith dialogue in the 21st century.

Saritoprak organises the book into nine thematic chapters expounded from three main themes in Islamic theology (p. xii), divinity, prophethood and eschatology, which aids in developing his main argument. It provides flow by establishing the context of Jesus as God's Messenger in the Qur'ān, which is not at all dissimilar from Jesus in the Bible, as they share a universal message. This sets the context for the significance of the eschatological role of Jesus from a theological perspective and is followed by interpretations of *hādīth* through an evaluation of literalist and figurative approaches. He concludes with his own figurative approach with an extension from previous scholarly works to highlight that the descent can establish common ground and encourage practicality for interfaith dialogue between both faiths.

Inclusively, Saritoprak presents a thoroughly researched academic piece as he incorporates a magnitude of sources throughout his work, ranging from Qur'ānic interpretations to English translated works from classical scholars as Abu-Hanifah (d. 772) to more modern Western Orientalists to provide a concise and balanced perspective regarding Jesus' position in Islam. In doing so, he comments on the accuracy of some authors, such as John of Damascus (d. 749) (p. 17), and the credibility of *hādīth* known as *khābar wahid* (single report *hādīth*). Unless specified, Saritoprak's translations of Arabic or Turkish texts are his own, highlighting not only the depth of this study but his well-versed ability in the field.

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² Zeki Saritoprak, *Islam's Jesus* (Gainesville Florida: University Press of Florida, 2014).

In contrast to other modern texts, he drifts away from the traditional separate glossary of Arabic words at the back of the book. Rather, they are italicised and defined throughout the text. This is quite encouraging as it provides a means for the reader to familiarise themselves with common concepts and terminology in Islamic theology critical for dialogue.

Hence, the book does not address only academics, but also the lay person and uses the Jesus theme to bring closer the adherents of both faiths rather than division. This is achieved through consideration of context and target audience as he introduces the book's need amid the post-September 11 tragedy (p. xi) that triggered an influx of publications about Islam. Saritoprak realised a need to present the Islamic belief in Jesus (p. xi) due to the limited availability of resources (p. xi) that neglect theological concepts of the ascension of Jesus, which can be used as a guide for common ground. Hence, in determining the role of Jesus, he stresses the theological term, a *rasul*, to denote, "sent by God to convey divine laws" (p. 1), highlighting that Jesus in the Qur'ān and Bible shared the same theological role.

In doing so, the author avoids the use of polemical language prevalent in more modern texts. For example, Muhammad 'Ata Ur-Rahim's *Jesus: A Prophet of Islam* focused on the debated concepts prevalent in the Qur'ān and Bible as similar.³ Saritoprak's description of Jesus in the Qur'ān not only dispels misinformed perspectives, but encourages a positive reflection between the differences and similarities (p. 15). Saritoprak argues the traditional Jesus is not at all dissimilar from Christianity's Jesus, since the essence of Muhammad's (pbuh)⁴ message is consistent with the universal teachings of Jesus in bringing the community towards the belief in the one true God (p. 4, 142). By attributing the differences to context and diverse interpretations, he is not only able to enhance his argument by offering the similitude between the two faiths, but he is also able to avoid stirring debate.

In contrast, he is wise to include the attributes that are not similar to ensure a balance in the argument even though it may affect the common grounds needed for dialogue. He finds one of the most crucial points of the death of Jesus understood by Christians is invalidated by the Qur'ān. Also, Christians in the Qur'ān⁵ are criticised for perceiving Jesus as son of God and inventing monasticism (p. 15). However, this is emphatically softened by highlighting the Qur'ānic verses praise of Christ's followers as, "they have tenderness and mercy" (p. 15). In this sense, the author opens the door for ongoing dialogue through acknowledging the sensitive real differences that exist between the two faiths. However, this can be perceived as an apologetic approach in an attempt to rectify Christian belief from its inventions. Despite the purpose of the chapter to inform and provide context for his eschatological role in the following chapters, this can be detrimental to his overall argument in achieving common ground.

Saritoprak renews the summary of works of classical period Muslim scholars by adding modern scholars' depth and understanding, merging the traditional with the contemporary. In bringing forth his main argument, he critically evaluates the theological validity of literalist

³ Muhammad 'Ata Ur-Rahim, *Jesus: A Prophet of Islam* (London: MWH London Publishers, 1979).

⁴ An abbreviated for peace and blessings be upon him, which is said after the Prophet of Islam's name as a sign of respect and praise.

⁵ Qur'ān 57:26-27.

and figurative scholars on the eschatological descent of Jesus and the relationship between Mahdi⁶ and Dajjal (Antichrist).⁷ Although he does not deny the presence of a literal coming of Jesus (p. 125), he finds the literalist approach (p. 111) was influenced by the need of a saviour (p. 106) against the Antichrist (p. 103) or perhaps the belief that God has power over all things. Nevertheless, he finds limited elaboration on this issue by classical theologians.

He is more attuned to the interpretive approach due to theological accuracy and its promotion of a common ground between Muslims and Christians. He uses Shatibi's (d. 1388) view "that the evidence for religious law cannot conflict with reason" (p. 112). He argues that Jesus' interpretive approach in the flesh as a cosmic event will compel people to believe, which goes against "free will" (p. 113). He perceives the descent and prayer of Jesus behind Mahdi as a revival of the spirit of Islam (p. 118) through non-violent struggle. Non-belief is personified through the concept of the Antichrist, (p. 121), a metaphorical battle between good and evil (p. 113). This is an uncommon interpretation and dates back to Said Nursi (d. 1960), while reflecting the principles of previous scholars such as Maturidi that identify with the verse, "there shall be no one of the People of the Book but left not believing him before his death" (p. 104).⁸ It is through this understanding the author hopes to bring about dialogue since the spiritual leadership of Jesus will provide a common understanding and belief among Muslims and Christians against non-belief.

The synthesis of these texts encourages a new dimension of understanding critical to the advancement of dialogue between faiths (p. xvi), since it adds spiritual dimension of Jesus with a focus on the allegorical meanings of Islamic sacred texts. Such a distinction is evident in Shedinger's publication, *Was Jesus a Muslim*, where he argues meta-religious dialogue should be replaced with interreligious dialogue to enable Muslim-Christian dialogue.⁹ He finds that "Jesus really is a Muslim;" however, this discovery is related in terms of his mission to the likening of the mission of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) rather than the eschatological role of Jesus, which, from an interpretive perspective, symbolises a spiritual "co-operation between Christians and Muslims."¹⁰

Unlike the reactionary works of some Muslims in modern period that compare Christian theologies invalidity with Islamic and Christian sources such as, *The mystery of the crucifixion*, *Mystery of the Messiah* and *Jesus: The Muslim Prophet* by Louay Fatoohi,¹¹ Saritoprak's work is unique in encouraging dialogue through the spiritual descent of Jesus and enhanced by placing theory into practice. He explains that dialogue has been a teaching of Prophet Muhammad, as is evident through the refuge sought under the Abyssinian King (p. 137). His

⁶ The Muslim belief that a leader will come before the end of the world and restore religion and justice.

⁷ An evil figure in the Islamic eschatology who pretends to be the Messiah to deceive people.

⁸ Qur'an 4:159.

⁹ R. F. Shedinger, *Was Jesus a Muslim?* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 136.

¹⁰ Ibid, 149.

¹¹ Louay Fatoohi, *Jesus: The Muslim Prophet: History Speaks of a Human Messiah not a Divine Christ* (Birmingham: Luna Plena Publishing, 2010). Louay Fatoohi, *The Mystery of the Messiah: The Messiahship of Jesus in the Qur'an, New Testament, Old Testament and Other Sources* (Birmingham: Luna Plena Publishing 2009). Louay Fatoohi, *The Mystery of the Crucifixion: The Attempt to kill Jesus in the Qur'an, the New Testament and Historical Sources* (Birmingham: Luna Plena Publishing, 2008).

inclusion of appendices from scholars, Muhammad Hamdi Yazir (d.1942), Said Nursi (d. 1960) and Fethullah Gulen (b.1941), focuses on the messages of Jesus and Muhammad (p. 170). Such examples provide guidance for its readers in promoting a positive trend towards the fulfilment of the messages of both Prophets and reviving a common prophetic practice in modern times that has been more reactionary over the years (p. 161).

Overall, a commendable read as Saritoprak's work effectively contributes to a gap in modern theological scholarship. Through his analysis of literal and interpretive approaches to the eschatological descent of Jesus, he presents a balanced view through rational argument in line with theological reasoning. His consciousness of presenting an interpretive approach, while not denying a literal one, is necessary since it may instigate negative debate among Muslims at the expense of interreligious dialogue.

How to look beyond the differences has never been an easy task as they are often the links to destroying dialogue and perhaps even an idealistic approach. However, his work is key to shifting away from modern reactionary works and aims to bring closer the adherents of both the Muslim and Christian faiths through a spiritual foundation for co-operation and understanding.