Although it would be an anachronism to say that the Qurʾān contains a theology of Christianity, it certainly contains numerous references to Jesus and his followers, and to Christian theories and practices. The wording of these references is rather different from the common names that Christians use for themselves, and so careful attention must be paid to the terms that the Qurʾān uses when it refers to Christianity, since this may be indicative of the literary style of the Qurʾānic approach to other religions, more specifically the so-called ‘People of the Book’.

In his book, *Understanding Christian–Muslim Relations*, Clinton Bennett identifies three broad categories that can be used to explore the contents of the many verses in the Qurʾān that are directly relevant to Christian–Muslim relations (Bennett 2008: 43). The first category refers to Jesus as one of the prophets and messengers, and it will be discussed in this chapter, as will be Mary, the mother of Jesus, and his disciples. The second category refers to the Christian Bible as one of the scriptures revealed by God; this category will be touched upon here in the third section but elaborated in the next chapter about the Bible in the Qurʾān. The third category refers to Christians as people who appeal to Jesus and his message but in fact have deviated from his message in their religious doctrines and practices. This category will be discussed in the fourth section of this chapter but will also be addressed in Chapter 6 on the dynamics of the Qurʾānic account of Christianity. The main consequence of the division into these three categories is that the Qurʾān tends to distinguish sharply between the true monotheism of Jesus and the distortions introduced by later Christians. It thus provides pictures of a ‘Qurʾānic Jesus’ and ‘Qurʾānic Christians’ that are different from the Christian portrayals of Christ and his followers, which of course highlight the continuity between the historical Jesus and the Christian faith.

**The Qurʾānic Jesus and his mother**

It is evident that Jesus is one of the most important prophets in the Qurʾān, together with Abraham, Noah and Moses. References to Jesus and to events in his life occur in almost one hundred verses in fifteen different sūras. However, the name that is used to refer to him, ʿĪsā ibn Maryam, is ‘strikingly different’ from Christian usage (Robinson 2003: 8) for two reasons. In the first place, the form ʿĪsā is not immediately recognisable as being derived from the Hebrew or Greek, or even Syriac. Even though some authors have suggested a possible influence of the name Esau or an assimilation with the name Mūsā for Moses (Anawati 1978: 81), the majority of scholars
nowadays agree that the form derives from the east-Syriac Ḥšūʿ and is an Arabicized form of a name that was current among Syriac-speaking Christians in the seventh century (Robinson 2003: 10). In the second place, the name Jesus is very often accompanied by the familial attribution ‘son of Mary’ (ḥbn Maryam), which does point to the absence of a human father but mainly seems to indicate the importance of Mary in the Qurʾān as the mother of Jesus. Another attribute frequently added to Jesus’ name is al-Masīḥ, which clearly translates the Hebrew Māšīḥaḥ, although translating it as ‘Christ’ would be misleading as it would import Christian connotations that are not acknowledged by the Qurʾān.

Nowhere does the Qurʾān tell the story of Jesus of Nazareth as a prophet of God, though it clearly presupposes knowledge of such stories among its hearers and readers so that it can limit itself to allusions and resonances. ‘[T]he Qurʾān assumes that its audience is thoroughly familiar with Jewish and Christian, canonical and noncanonical, scriptural and nonscriptural prophetic lore’ (Griffith 2013: 26). Its style ‘is evidently allusive. The Qurʾān does not seem to quote texts, Biblical or otherwise, at all. Instead the Qurʾān alludes to them as it develops a unique religious message’ (Reynolds 2010: 36). The absence of any recognisable quotation from the Bible seems to indicate that the intertextuality with Jewish and Christian sources was of an oral nature. As Angelika Neuwirth has argued, the very term qurʾān (‘recitation’ or ‘text to be recited’) indicates that the texts were initially transmitted orally, and even the later term kitāb (‘book’ or ‘scripture’) still has a strong oral component (Neuwirth 2006: 146). Moreover, since the Jewish and Christian scriptures were not yet translated into Arabic, ‘knowledge of their contents normally spread orally among Arabic-speaking peoples’ (Griffith 2013: 43).

References to Jesus can be found in fifteen sūnas. Most are quite short, designating Jesus as one of the major messengers and prophets and as the recipient of a revelation from God, the Injīl (from the Greek Evangeliō, ‘good news’ or Gospel, probably through the Ethiopic ṭawgēl). The relation between Jesus and the Injīl is conceived in parallel with the relation between Moses and the Tawrāt and Muḥammad and the Qurʾān: in each case God gave his revelation containing guidance and specific ordinances to his messenger, who was charged with the task of proclaiming it faithfully. This being so, it would be misleading to translate Injīl as Gospel or even New Testament because of the different theological conception. While Christians conceive the different Gospels and other writings of the New Testament as human proclamations about the person and work of Christ, the Qurʾān only recognizes one Injīl containing God’s revelation given to the prophet Jesus, son of Mary. This difference is one of the reasons for the later charge of taḥrīf (‘corruption’) according to which Muslims began to think that Christians—like Jews—changed the text or the meaning of the original revelation intentionally. Consequently, the books that Jews and Christians have in their hands are not the original Tawrāt and Injīl (Griffith 2002: 342). The Qurʾān contains a similar charge: Christians, who are the ‘People of the Gospel’ (ahl Injīl, Q. 5:47), do not act and judge according to the revelation given to them. The implication is that there is often a chasm that separates Jesus as a faithful believer in the one true God from the later falsifications by Christians of this faith.

At two places there are long series of statements concerning Jesus and his family, namely Q 3:33–64 and 19:16–40. Some of these statements form clear parallels to the first chapters of the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, and even more to some of the apocryphal gospels such as the Protoevangelium of James and others. Starting with Zachariah and John the Baptist (Yāḥyā), the announcement to Mary and the birth of Jesus, a series of events is related that contains elements of what we could call a ‘life of Jesus and his family’ in the Qurʾān (Parrinder 1995: 55–82). Yet the titles of these two sūnas, Āl ʾImān and Maryam respectively, show that the observation of Smith and Haddad (1989) and after them Leirvik (2010: 19) is true, that references to
Jesus often occur in a context in which Mary is the dominant figure. While the title of Sūra Maryam refers to Mary herself, the title Āl ‘Imrān refers to the family of Mary’s father – at some places identified with the father of the Jewish prophet Miriam, the sister of Moses and Aaron (Wensinck and Johnstone 1991: 629). Whether this is due to a possible confusion between the two Marys or rather to a form of qur’ānic typology, the important point is that the Qurʾān discusses Jesus in a similar way to Moses or Abraham: as an important prophet with a special message from God. This special status of Jesus as messenger (rasūl) is foreshadowed by events surrounding his annunciation, conception and birth, and it is clearly shown in signs that Jesus performs. In this respect, the Qurʾān even mentions miracles by the child that have no parallel in the canonical Gospels, such as the miracle of the clay bird coming to life (Q 3:49); yet it hastens to add that Jesus performed these miracles bi-idhni Llāh, ‘with God’s permission’ (Abdel Haleem 2010: 57) so that the Christian inference about his divinity is immediately excluded.

Another element that highlights the status of Jesus as a messenger is his strong rebuttal to those who think that his mother has been unchaste. In this respect, the Qurʾān contains a strong suggestion that not only was Jesus as prophet without sin or blemish but also that his mother guarded herself against any impurity (Stowasser 2003: 290). So, even though there are clear parallels between the biblical infancy stories and the qurʾānic statements about Jesus and his mother Mary, any comparison between the two sets of texts is bound to remain superficial if it does not acknowledge the theological objective of the Qurʾān: to present Jesus as a faithful messenger and servant of God.

The most notorious difference between the qurʾānic testimony concerning Jesus and Christian belief in Jesus as Saviour is probably the enigmatic Q 4:157 that seems to imply that Jesus did not die on the cross. In this passage, the Jews are addressed and reproached for breaking the covenant and demanding physical signs of revelation. The verses immediately preceding the crucifixion verse argue that they rejected God’s revelations, killed their prophets and refused to open their hearts. Moreover, they

> uttered a terrible slander against Mary and said, “We have killed the Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary, the Messenger of God”. They did not kill him, nor did they crucify him, though it was made to appear like that to them; those that disagreed about him are full of doubt, with no knowledge to follow, only supposition: they certainly did not kill him – No! God raised him up to Himself. God is almighty and wise.

(Q 4:156–8, Abdel Haleem 2010: 104)

Many books and articles have been written about the history of interpretation of this passage and its importance for Christian–Muslim dialogue (Ayoub 1980; Zahniser 2008; Lawson 2009; Mourad 2011; Roberts 2013). One of the major challenges is the exact interpretation of the words shubhīha lahum (‘it [or ‘he’] was made to appear like that to them’): does this indicate that Jesus was only seemingly crucified, or was someone else made to bear his likeness. Yet, in the text of the Qurʾān itself the denial of the crucifixion is clearly subordinate to the major point made here: the ‘people of Scripture’ (here clearly the Jews) refuse to acknowledge a new revelation from God when it is sent to them. Their slander about Mary and their boasting – another misuse of language – that they have killed the Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary, messenger of God, demonstrates their hardheartedness. It is important to see how the Qurʾān here deploys its full Christological terminology – al-Masīh ʾĪsā ibn Maryam rasūl Allāh – in order to extol Jesus as a full prophet and messenger of God in contrast to the obstinate people who deny he was sent by God. From the point of view of later developments in Christian–Muslim
dialogue it is fascinating to focus on the cross as the deepest expression of the differences in the conceptualizations of relations between God and humanity in the two religions, as Mona Siddiqui movingly and convincingly does in the last chapters of her *Christians, Muslims, & Jesus* (Siddiqui 2013). Yet the denial of the necessity of salvation does not seem to be on the Qurʾān’s horizon; it is mainly concerned to condemn the Jewish denial of the prophethood of Jesus – with the Christian denial of the prophethood of Muhammad very much within its purview.

The third important set of references to Jesus – after the references to his birth and the scanty references to the Jewish claims to have crucified him – is related to his future. In the first place, the Qurʾān seems to suggest clearly that God will confirm Jesus as prophet and exalt him to a life with God, who is quoted in the Qurʾān as saying:

Jesus, I will take you back [mutawaffīka] and raise you up to Me: I will purify you of the disbelievers. To the Day of Resurrection I will make those who followed you superior to those who disbelieved. Then you will all return to Me and I will judge between you regarding your differences.

(Q 3:55, Abdel Haleem 2010: 58)

In this case, the word *mutawaffīka* has caused quite divergent interpretations, since it can mean ‘I receive you back’ or ‘I cause you to sleep’ or ‘I cause you to die’ (Robinson 2003: 18). In the mainstream Islamic tradition the verse has been taken to mean that Jesus was brought to sleep and in that state raised to heaven, and that he will return to earth. He will be a witness against those who made him divine on the day of judgement, according to this verse: ‘God raised him up to Himself. God is almighty and wise. There is not one of the People of the Book who will not believe in [Jesus] before his death, and on the Day of Resurrection he will be a witness against them’ (Q 4:158–9, Abdel Haleem 2010: 104). Once more the Qurʾān makes a sharp distinction between the faith of Jesus, who was a true messenger and a servant of the one God, and the unbelief of his later followers who committed the sin of *shirk* by letting Christ share in the divinity of God. The clearest rebuke of such a sin is given in the following conversation, where God questions Jesus whether he has been the source of this associating:

When God will say, ‘Jesus, son of Mary, did you say to people: Take me and my mother as two gods alongside God’? he will say, ‘May You be exalted! I would never say what I have no right to say – if I had said any such thing You would have known it: You know all that is within me, though I do not know what is within You, You alone have full knowledge of things unseen – I told them only what You commanded me to: “Worship God, my Lord and your Lord”’


So Jesus sees himself – and by implication his mother – as a faithful servant of the Lord and not as a lord himself, as Christians are alleged to have said.

Later Islamic tradition has engaged in extended speculations about the role of Jesus in the eschatological events that are sometimes summarised in the ‘final hour’ (Saritoprak 2014: 38). Even though these speculations have their roots in the Qurʾān, the text itself contains only a few references to any role of Jesus in the future. The most important of these is the rather enigmatic statement that can be read as Jesus being ‘the sign for the hour’ or as him giving ‘knowledge of the hour’ (Q 43:61). Muslim theologians have concluded from this that Jesus will descend to earth and play an important role in the events leading up to the final judgment. However, the Qurʾānic reference can be interpreted differently (Anawati 1978: 84–5; Saritoprak 2014: 27–33),
and therefore this topic should be discussed in the history of the interpretation of the Qurʾān rather than as part of qurʾānic teaching about Jesus.

**The first disciples of Jesus**

Another rather enigmatic statement is the term that the Qurʾān uses to refer to the first followers of Jesus, al-hawāriyyūn, a word that is usually translated as ‘disciples’ or ‘apostles’ even though the origin of the Arabic word is unclear. The usual interpretation that is given in the Islamic tradition connects this word with the Arabic root ḥwr (‘to be white’), thus associating the followers of Jesus with white clothes or the profession of whitening clothes. However, it is much more probable that the term is cognate to the Ethiopic equivalent, where it simply means ‘walkers’ and is the regular term for the Apostles (Reynolds 2013: 210). The three places in the Qurʾān that mention them, 3:52, 5:111 and 61:14, state that they profess to be helpers of God, that they believe in God and that they submit to God. On this basis, the Islamic tradition of interpretation has generally assumed that the disciples who formed the inner circle around Jesus as a faithful prophet of God were themselves faithful believers as well. After all, they declare themselves to be muslimūn (‘submitting themselves to God’). However, Gabriel Reynolds has recently drawn attention to the ambiguous nature of the terms the Qurʾān uses when referring to Christians. The Christian notion of ‘apostle’ or ‘disciple’ characterises them as witnesses of the risen Christ, while the qurʾānic notion characterises them as faithful to the one God (Reynolds 2013: 214). Moreover, in two of the verses in the Qurʾān the hawāriyyūn are characterised as ansār (‘helpers’), a word that is important in the later biography of Muhammad as a description of the group of Medinans that helped to form the first Muslim community. Yet, at the same time, these disciples do not prove to be as faithful as they claim because they do not remain true to their declaration of faith but ask for a validating sign from heaven, as the context of the qurʾānic verses suggests in 3:54 and 5:112. As is suggested by Q 61:14: ‘some of the Children of Israel believed and some disbelieved’ (Abdel Haleem 2010: 553). This verse returns to the main theme that the Qurʾān develops in connection with Jesus and the Christians: while he himself was a faithful prophet of the one God, many Christians did not accept his message but reverted to their unbelief or invented new stories that distanced them from the true faith of the prophet who had been sent to them.

**Jesus as one of the prophets and messengers**

Although it is true that the Qurʾān pays special attention to Jesus, the most important feature of its presentation of him is that he is one of the prophets and, it would seem, not even the most important of them, since references and allusions to Moses in the Qurʾān clearly outnumber references and allusions to Jesus. As will be seen later, the special attention to Moses and Jesus – and, to a lesser extent, Abraham – is related to the fact that the Qurʾān frequently addresses Jews and Christians directly and tries to convince them to accept the new revelation sent down to the prophet Muḥammad. At other places, though, Jesus is simply referred to as one of the prophets, or – more often – messengers. These references form one of the most important ingredients of what Sidney Griffith calls the ‘Scriptural recall in the Qurʾān’ (Griffith 2013: 57). He remarks that the qurʾānic view of the role of the prophets differs considerably from the biblical view of their function (Griffith 2013: 62). Although some of the prophets receive special and separate attention, very often the Qurʾān views them all as bringers of the same basic message from God. Therefore, the Qurʾān often enumerates a series of recollections of biblical and nonbiblical prophets who were sent with the same message to their own people, announced it to an often
unfaithful audience and were ultimately vindicated by God while their adversaries were punished. This basic pattern of prophetology determines ‘the shape of the recall of even the most familiar of biblical figures and their stories in the Qurʾān’ (Griffith 2013: 70). Not surprisingly, this pattern also determines the nature of the biblical stories about Jesus as a prophet who is ultimately vindicated by God against his adversaries (Griffith 2013: 85). However, in recalling the opposition to Jesus, the Qurʾān simultaneously refers to another opposition, the refusal by the large majority of Jews and Christians to accept its own message. In the case of the Christians, the Qurʾān discusses the cause of their refusal to accept the truth as a deviation from the original message of Jesus, thus drawing a sharp contrast between Jesus and those who claim the name ‘Christians’ while they are, in fact, unfaithful to the real Jesus.

### Christians and their inventions

The Qurʾān often addresses Christians and other People of Scripture as those who cannot be categorised as either believers or unbelievers but rather as a mixture of both. Thus, ‘There are People of the Book who, if you [Prophet] entrust them with a heap of gold, will return it to you intact, but there are others of them who, if you entrust them with a single dinar, will not return it to you’ (Q 3:75; Abdel Haleem 2010: 60). Using categories coined by Asma Barlas, Jerusha Tanner Lamptey explains this specific qurʾānic dynamic in its approach to religious others as a distinction between hierarchical and lateral difference (Lamptey 2014: 139). While hierarchical difference is construed on the basis of the semantic field of taqwā (‘piety’ or ‘God-consciousness’), lateral difference is construed on the basis of the semantic field of umma (‘religious community’). Lamptey’s point is that the Qurʾān evaluates religious others not on the basis of the religious community to which they belong but on the basis of the God-consciousness they exhibit (Lamptey 2014: 168). Therefore, the qurʾānic approach to Christians can sometimes be very positive but can sometimes be very negative, and most often it is a mixture of both. A good example is again taken from Sūrat Al ʿImrān:

> But they are not all alike. There are some among the People of the Book who are upright, who recite God’s revelations during the night, who bow down in worship, who believe in God and the Last Day, who order what is right and forbid what is wrong, who are quick to do good deeds. These people are among the righteous and they will not be denied [the reward] for whatever good deeds they do: God knows exactly who is conscious of Him.

(Q 3:113–15; Abdel Haleem 2010: 65)

At this place, an ‘upright community’ (umma qāʾima) is singled out from among the People of Scripture. They clearly display taqwā in their ethical and liturgical behaviour and in their faith in God and the Last Day.

This is one of the few places where the Qurʾān seems to highlight the good faith of the Christian community, or at least of some of its members. In other places, it limits the characteristics of true taqwā to two or three, while at the same time it widens the category of communities who will be rewarded, most clearly in Q 2:62: ‘The [Muslim] believers, the Jews, the Christians, and the Sabians – all those who believe in God and the Last Day and do good – will have their rewards with their Lord. No fear for them, nor will they grieve’ (Abdel Haleem 2010: 11; see also Q 5:69). These are among a handful of verses that Jane Dammen McAuliffe discusses in her influential book Qurʾānic Christians (McAuliffe 1991), in which she focuses on texts from the Qurʾān that give a positive account of Christians. However, she comes to the conclusion that the Qurʾān
makes its own ‘conceptual idealization’ of Christians which ‘bears very little relation to present or past sociological configurations of the Christian community’ (McAuliffe 1991: 287). Moreover, the Christians who are lauded or commended in the Qurʾān are in the later tafsīr (commentary) tradition usually interpreted as having converted to Islam. This is the case, for instance, with the following verse: ‘Some of the People of the Book believe in God, in what has been sent down to you and in what has been sent down to them: humbling themselves before God, they would never sell God’s revelation for a small price. These people will have their rewards with their Lord: God is swift in reckoning’ (Q 3:199; Abdel Haleem 2010: 77). The commentary tradition connects this verse with the Negus of Abyssinia, with ʿAbd Allāh ibn Salām, or with other converts to Islam, but in all cases the People of Scripture who are praised are supposed to have converted to Islam (McAuliffe 1991: 177). The same holds true for the perhaps most positive verses about Christians in the Qurʾān:

You are sure to find that the closest in affection towards the believers are those who say, “We are Christians”, for there are among them people devoted to learning and ascetics. These people are not given to arrogance, and when they listen to what has been sent down to the Messenger, you will see their eyes overflowing with tears because they recognise the Truth [in it]. They say, “Our Lord, we believe, so count us amongst the witnesses”.

(Q 5:82–83; Abdel Haleem 2010: 122–3)

Again, the tafsīr tradition tends to narrow down the significance of the praise for Christians to those who, upon hearing God’s revelation, recognise its truth and become part of the Muslim community (McAuliffe 1991: 236).

At the same time, some of these verses seem to indicate characteristics of Christians that are viewed positively, such as their humility, their devotion to learning and their openness to listen to God’s Word. Apparently, the Qurʾān often sees the community of Christians as a mixed community in which good and bad habits exist together. The clearest expression of this approach is Q 57:27–8

We sent other messengers to follow in their footsteps. After those We sent Jesus, son of Mary: We gave him the Gospel and put compassion and mercy into the hearts of his followers. But monasticism was something they invented – We did not ordain it for them – only to seek God’s pleasure, and even so, they did not observe it properly. So We gave a reward to those of them who believed, but many of them were lawbreakers.

(Abdel Haleem 2010: 542)

This ‘puzzling praise of monasticism’ (McAuliffe 1991: 263) is a good example of the distinction the Qurʾān makes between Jesus and many of his followers: in trying to seek God’s pleasure, they have invented religious institutions and practices that are not in accordance with God’s original Gospel. The word ibtidāʿ (‘invention’) may serve to characterise the qurʾānic view about the difference between Jesus and many Christians: in their excessive zeal, they added to what had been revealed to them and thus diverged from what was ordained for them. Apparently, asceticism and monasticism have an ambiguous nature: as means to intensify the search for God’s pleasure they can be praiseworthy, but as human inventions they may lead away from God’s law.

This basic idea in the Qurʾān of Christians moving away from the strict monotheism of the prophets, including Jesus, explains why the most polemical texts about Christians discuss
the two fundamental theological ideas of Incarnation and Trinity as inventions that corrupt such monotheism. Some texts explicitly oppose the Christian confession of a Trinitarian God to Jesus’ own profession of a monotheistic faith (Q 5:72; 5:116). Other texts characterise the Christians’ religion as a form of exceeding the bounds of proper religion:

People of the Book, do not go to excess in your religion, and do not say anything about God except the truth: the Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary, was nothing more than a messenger of God, His word directed to Mary, and a spirit from Him. So believe in God and His messengers and do not speak of a “Trinity” – stop [this], that is better for you – God is only one God, He is far above having a son, everything in the heavens and earth belongs to Him and He is the best one to trust.

(Q 4:171; Abdel Haleem 2010: 106)

It is interesting that at this place the Qurʾān mentions some of the terms that are used by Christians in their Trinitarian speculations, such as kalima (‘word’) and rūḥ (‘spirit’), while at the same time it corrects such usages. It should be said that, contrary to what Abdel Haleem’s translation suggests, the Qurʾān does not directly mention the doctrine of the Trinity here; it simply incites Christians to desist from saying ‘three’ (thalātha). Yet one cannot escape the conclusion that this phrase ‘must be taken as intended to refute the central Christian doctrine of the Trinity, and, as such, as a radical deconstruction of that doctrine in its essential formulation of three discrete beings who share in divinity’ (Thomas 2006: 371).

In summary, we can conclude that the Qurʾān views Christianity through the clear lens of monotheism as its central doctrinal theme. Where Christians side with the true prophets and messengers of God in confessing the oneness of God (tawḥīd), they are appreciated as truly centred on God, but where they invent new forms of religion, they exceed and transgress the boundaries of true monotheism. This is the reason why the Qurʾān so often opposes the true faith of the prophet Jesus, son of Mary, to the corrupt nature of the faith of many Christians who came after.

References


Further reading