

The Meaning of al-Masih

Christians and Muslims share similar symbols and stories. Yet, Muslims and Christians have come to define these symbols and stories in different ways. In order for us to have intelligent discourse about faith, we must be clear about our terms at the outset.

What do we mean by calling Jesus the “Messiah” or, as the Qur’an says, “al-Masih”?

The Messiah, is a deeply important religious word inherited from the ancient Hebrew tradition of kingship. It literally means “anointed”, referring to the anointing of oil on Hebrew kings or the anointing of the divine spirit on God’s prophets. Christians believe that Jesus is the Christ, a direct Greek translation of the Hebrew word for Messiah. When Christians speak of Jesus Christ we are making a messianic claim about our founder. When Muslims speak of al-Masih they are making a very different claim. Thus it is of utmost importance for us to gain clear understanding of this term of mutual use. The term goes to the heart of our truth claims.

What do Muslims mean by “al-Masih”?

Eleven times in the Qur’an Jesus is given the honorific title “al-Masih” (3:45; 4:157, 171, 172; 5:17 (2x), 72(2x), 75; 9:30, 31). In each case this title applies to Jesus alone. There is no one else in the Qur’an given this title at any point in time. What is more, the definite article “al” suggests that its attribution to Jesus distinguishes him from all other prophets. But this is where the Qur’an stops. We are given no further information as to what the title refers. There are five popular explanations: 1. “filled with blessing” (Tabari 3:45), 2. “Blessed One” (Baidawi), 3. anointed” from his touching people to heal them (Baidawi), 4. “purified” from sin (Tabari), 5. Having to do with feet or walking because of his itinerant ministry (Sufi view). One lexicographer, al-Faruzibadi, says that there are fifty explanations for the word. Yet, the Qur’an itself never gives a definition for even one of these. In fact, it appears to assume knowledge regarding what the term does not mean as opposed to teaching us what it does mean. In Sura 4:157 and 4:171 the Qur’an claims that the Messiah was not crucified, was only a messenger of Allah, and was just a human. The-

se three negations suggest that there was an assumed understanding of the term, and that the Qur’an was denying it. But, was the Qur’an addressing the proper understanding? And why was the term used at all? Although the title falls within a very important and ancient messianic tradition, as al-Zamakhshari and al-Baidhawi note, the Qur’an gives no further explanation as to its meaning. Why does the Qur’an acknowledge that Jesus was the Messiah, and yet fail to explain what that means? Why give him a unique title and not tell us about its uniqueness?

As a result of the silence regarding this important question, if Muslims want to understand this all important term, they are obliged to obey Qur’anic procedure with any question: “Ask the people of the Book if you do not understand” (Sura 10:94, 21:7).

What do Christians mean by “Messiah”?

Christians agree with Muslims that Jesus indeed is the Messiah, but we differ significantly in our understanding of that term. Christians take their understanding from the Jewish tradition that Jesus fulfilled. The Bible has only one meaning for the word “messiah”—an anointed one. It generally refers to the kings of Israel anointed by God to rule. At the same time, the Old Testament refers to a single, divine agent who would be *The Messiah*, God’s final king on earth. As a result, the Bible presents the messiah as superior to other prophets fulfilling three main expectations: 1. God’s king for Israel, 2. Ultimate prophet with final and authoritative teaching, 3. A servant who would personally suffer the wrath of God on behalf of the people. The Jews of Jesus’ day had differing assumptions about how these three hopes would fit together by focussing on the first two proclaiming the messiah as a warrior-king. Jesus did not indulge such nationalistic hopes, and instead used the term “Son of Man” for himself to clarify how he fulfilled each of these three. Let’s look at them each in turn:

1. King of Israel

Although Jesus accepted the term “son of David” when applied to him (Matthew 9:27; 15:22; 21:9; 21:15; Mark 10:47), Jesus’ preferred title for himself was “Son of Man” which he used 83 times. This is a direct reference to the imagery of Daniel 7:13-14, a

prophecy made hundreds of years before Christ about the royal exaltation of the Messiah:

"In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed."

In Jesus’ use of the term “Son of Man” for himself, he was not only claiming to fulfil the royal hopes for the messiah, but also was clarifying that this was messianic hope set on a cosmic scale.

2. Ultimate Prophet

A second important aspect the messiah fulfilled was that of the final prophet, the promised prophet like Moses.

“I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers; I will put my words in his mouth, and he will tell them everything I command him.” (Deuteronomy 18:18)

Responding to Jewish leaders who were not believing in him, he said, “If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me.” (John 5:46)

3. Suffering Servant

The Messiah was said to take upon himself the wrath of God as a guilt offering for sin. This is found in Isaiah 53:10-12:

“Yet it was the Lord’s will to crush him and cause him to suffer, and though the Lord makes his life a guilt offering, he will see his offspring and prolong his days, and the will of the Lord will prosper in his hand. After the suffering of his soul, he will see the light of life and be satisfied; by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many, and he will bear their iniquities. Therefore I will give him a portion among the great, and he will divide the spoils with the strong, because he poured out his life unto death, and was numbered with the transgressors. For he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.”

Jesus not only claimed to fulfil this expectation himself when he said, “*the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many*” (Mark 10:45), but demonstrated its fulfilment

when he was crucified as a sin offering.

“Messiah,” “Son of Man,” or “Son of God”?

We have already seen in the passage quoted from Daniel 7:13-14 that the Son of Man title informs our understanding of the messiah being a universal king given divine authority on earth. We can see that although the title son of man sometimes refers to a humble human estate, the reference in Daniel suggests that it is a divine title. Other references to a divine messiah can be found in Isaiah 9:6, or 2 Samuel 7:14.

The Qur’an says that “God does not have sons”. (Sura 112) This is seeking to deny the title “Son of God” which carries a significant relevance to the Christian understanding of Jesus. In fact we see Jesus referred to as “Son of God” 35 times in the gospels. Israel’s kings were often referred to as ‘sons of God.’ What the Qur’an doesn’t like about the title is that it speaks of his unique relationship with the father where “whatever the Father does the Son also does” (John 5:19) and that Jesus is “one with the father” (John 10:30) implying his being of the same spiritual essence. Jesus’ claim to the decisive title “*the* Son of God” suggests that he was the fulfilment of Israel’s kingship; he was the promised king, the royal Messiah.

All three titles are connected in the Bible, all three refer to God’s chosen agent to bring his will on earth, and all three are claimed by Jesus.

The Return of the Messiah

As has been alluded, the common Jewish expectation was for the messiah to be a warrior-king. He would be the Deliverer of Israel who expelled the pagan occupiers, would Rule over Israel as God’s Supremely Anointed One, and subject all other nations to them. But, they failed to understand the intricacies of God’s plan. Yes, the Messiah will come again as a warrior, not to vindicate the Jewish nation, but to judge all the unbelieving.

In God’s great mercy he has granted you a time of reprieve. He sent the Messiah to come first as the suffering servant to purchase the ransom of your eternal salvation, but, as Sura 4:159 affirms, the Messiah will return again to vindicate his name. By looking to the pictures of the Messiah in Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, and Daniel; Jesus’ contemporaries should have seen that the Messiah would come first in obscurity to suffer and only later come back to take on the role that

they had anticipated for him.

This role as warrior-king is a role that Muslims still assign to al-Masih today, thus making the same mistake as the first century Jews who failed to take into account the full meaning of the term Messiah. We must not be proud, as Sura 4:172 commands, and put our own understandings on God’s Word. If Muslims want to understand the intricacies of the term al-Masih as attributed to Jesus they must ask those called by his name, the Christians or, in other words, “followers of the Messiah.”

We are now left with the material to make a decision for ourselves. Jesus performed the miracles of healing a blind man, healing a deaf man, and fed 5,000 people in the Judean wilderness on twelve loaves of bread and two fish Jesus. He then went away and asked his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” To this Peter replied, “You are the Christ!” showing his clear understanding of Jesus’ fulfilment of messianic prophecy (Mark 8:27-29).

I suggest that we listen to the Qur’an as it directs us to the honourable title al-Masih for Jesus. But we must clearly understand this as coming from a rich Jewish tradition, which the Qur’an fails to explain to us. When placed in this context our response will be like that of Martha who said, “I believe you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who is coming into the world” (John 11:27)

And now he asks you, “Who do you say that I am?”



If thou wert in doubt as to what
We have revealed unto thee, then
ask those who have been
reading the Book from before
thee....
(Surah, 10, Yunus, verse 94)

WHO IS AL-MASIH?

