

Islam, Sayyidina Isa (Alayhis Salaam) and the question of Jerusalem

And We made the son of Maryam (Mary) and his mother as a sign, And We gave them refuge on high ground, a place of rest, security and flowing springs.

(Qur'an – Surah Al Mu'minun: 50)

The 25th December is marked annually around the globe by Christians as Christmas, a day commemorating the birth of Jesus Christ (Sayyidina Isa alayhis Salaam). It is widely acknowledged that the date of birth of Sayyidina Isa (Alayhis Salaam) is not known with certainty, and it is most definitely not December 25. Nevertheless, from the 4th century CE onwards, Christian churches gradually began to commemorate the birth of Sayyidina Isa (Alayhis Salaam) on this day, in large part integrating themselves with ancient pagan festivals such as *Bacchanalia* and *Saturnalia*, which marked changes in weather patterns that occurred around this time annually.

The commemoration of Christmas on December 25 presupposes that Sayyidina Isa (Alayhis Salaam) was born in the season of winter. However, this belief is largely influenced by customs in Northern countries which experienced winter during this period of the year. According to early leaders of the Church, it was considered most likely that the nativity (birth of Sayyidina Isa Alayhis Salaam) took place either in late summer or early autumn. Likewise, references in the Qur'an are quite clear in indicating that this blessed birth took place in warm weather.

Nonetheless, the general global focus on the birth of Sayyidina Isa (Alayhis Salaam) during this period provides an opportunity to highlight Islamic beliefs about his miraculous birth and his esteemed status according to Muslims; to clarify misconceptions raised about his personality; and to explore common ground with people of other faiths via the actual blessed ground he was born on, walked upon and spread his message (i.e. Palestine/Jerusalem/al Quds).

Sayyidina Isa (alayhis salaam) – The miraculous birth

The Qur'an provides detailed accounts of the birth of Sayyidina Isa (alayhis salaam) across various chapters:

Surah Ale-Imraan, Verses 45-47:

[And mention] when the angels said, "O Maryam, indeed Allah gives you good tidings of a word from Him, whose name will be the Messiah, Isa, the son of Maryam - distinguished in this world and the Hereafter and among those brought near [to Allah]. He will speak to the people in the cradle and in maturity and will be of the righteous." She said, "My Lord, how will I have a child when no man has touched me?" [The angel] said, "Such is Allah; He creates what He wills. When He decrees a matter, He only says to it, 'Be,' and it is.

Surah Maryam, Verses 16-34:

And mention, [O Muhammad], in the Book [the story of] Maryam, when she withdrew from her family to a place toward the east. And she took, in seclusion from them, a screen. Then We sent to her Our Angel, and he represented himself to her as a well-proportioned man. She said, "Indeed, I seek refuge in the Most Merciful from you, [so leave me], if you should be fearing of Allah." He said, "I am only the messenger of your Lord to give you [news of] a pure boy." She said, "How can I have a boy while no man has touched me and I have not been unchaste?" He said, "Thus [it will be]; your

Lord says, 'It is easy for Me, and We will make him a sign to the people and a mercy from Us. And it is a matter [already] decreed.' "So she conceived him, and she withdrew with him to a remote place. And the pains of childbirth drove her to the trunk of a palm tree. She said, "Oh, I wish I had died before this and was in oblivion, forgotten." But he called her from below her, "Do not grieve; your Lord has provided beneath you a stream. And shake toward you the trunk of the palm tree; it will drop upon you ripe, fresh dates. So eat and drink and be contented. And if you see from among humanity anyone, say, 'Indeed, I have vowed to the Most Merciful abstention, so I will not speak today to [any] man.' "Then she brought him to her people, carrying him. They said, "O Maryam, you have certainly done a thing unprecedented. O sister of Aaron, your father was not a man of evil, nor was your mother unchaste." So she pointed to him. They said, "How can we speak to one who is in the cradle a child?" [Isa] said, "Indeed, I am the servant of Allah. He has given me the Scripture and made me a prophet. And He has made me blessed wherever I am and has enjoined upon me prayer and zakah as long as I remain alive. And [made me] dutiful to my mother, and He has not made me a wretched tyrant. And peace is on me the day I was born and the day I will die and the day I am raised alive." That is Isa, the son of Maryam - the word of truth about which they are in dispute.

The detailed accounts in these verses affirm the miraculous circumstances surrounding the birth of Sayyidina Isa (alayhis salaam) – which occurred without male intervention. The entire episode of his birth is a testimony to the Omnipotence of Allah (SWT) – “Allah SWT creates what He wills.” He requires no medium or cause. His Will alone is sufficient to bring something into existence.

Because of these miraculous circumstances of his birth, Sayyidina Isa (alayhis salaam) is known as Ruhullah (The Spirit of Allah). This is not taken in a literal sense; he is called this because Allah had the Angel Jibril honour Maryam (radiallahu anha) to give birth to Isa without the need for a partner. Jibraeel (AS) is the angel who blew the Ruh of Isa (alayhis salaam) into Maryam (radiallahu anha).

The birth of Isa (alayhis salaam) was also unique in other ways:

Sayyidina Abu Huraira reported: The Messenger of Allah (ﷺ) said, “No person is born but that he is pricked by Satan and he cries from the touch of Satan, except for Maryam and her son.”

Abu Huraira said, “Recite the verse if you wish: Verily, I seek refuge for her and her offspring from the cursed Satan.” (3:36)

(Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī 3248, Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim 2366)

Sayyidina Isa (alayhis salaam) thereafter went on to speak with maturity as an infant, another in a string of Divinely-ordained miracles that would come to characterise his mission.

Status of Sayyidina Isa (alayhis salaam) in Islam

- **Belief in him being a Prophet is an article of faith – an essential component of being considered a Muslim**

Say (O Muslims), "We believe in Allah and that which has been sent down to us and that which has been sent down to Ibrahim (Abraham), Isma'il (Ishmael), Ishaque (Isaac), Ya'qub (Jacob), and to Al-Asbat [the twelve sons of Ya'qub (Jacob)], and that which has been given to Musa (Moses) and 'Isa (Jesus), and that which has been given to the Prophets from their

Lord. We make no distinction between any of them, and to Him we have submitted (in Islam)." (Qur'an – Surah Al Baqarah: 126)

- **Sayyidina Isa (alayhis salaam) is one of the Ulul Azm – highest ranking Prophets**
- **His virtues and characteristics are extolled in Qur'an and Ahadeeth**

And He will teach him writing and wisdom and the Torah and the Gospel. And [make him] a messenger to the Children of Israel, [who will say], 'Indeed I have come to you with a sign from your Lord in that I design for you from clay [that which is] like the form of a bird, then I breathe into it and it becomes a bird by permission of Allah . And I cure the blind and the leper, and I give life to the dead - by permission of Allah. And I inform you of what you eat and what you store in your houses. Indeed in that is a sign for you, if you are believers. (Qur'an – Surah Ale Imraan - 48-49)

[Mention] when Allah said, "O Jesus, indeed I will take you and raise you to Myself and purify you from those who disbelieve and make those who follow you [in submission to Allah alone] superior to those who disbelieve until the Day of Resurrection. Then to Me is your return, and I will judge between you concerning that in which you used to differ. (Qur'an – Surah Ale Imraan: 55)

Allah's Messenger (ﷺ) said, "By Him in Whose Hands my soul is, surely (Isa,) the son of Maryam will soon descend amongst you and will judge mankind justly (as a Just Ruler); he will break the Cross and kill the pigs and there will be no Jizya (i.e. taxation taken from non-Muslims). Money will be in abundance so that nobody will accept it, and a single prostration to Allah (in prayer) will be better than the whole world and whatever is in it." Abu Huraira added "If you wish, you can recite (this verse of the Holy Book): -- 'And there is none Of the people of the Scriptures (Jews and Christians) But must believe in him (i.e Jesus as an Apostle of Allah and a human being) Before his death. And on the Day of Judgment He will be a witness against them." (4.159) (Sahih al-Bukhari 3448)

Regarding the return of Sayyidina Isa (alayhis salaam) to the world towards the end of time, the belief of Muslims in this is absolute and unanimous, and the denier of this falls out of the pale of Islam. Scholars of Islam have gathered more than 100 *mutawatir* Ahadeeth that unequivocally prove that Sayyidina Isa (alayhis salaam) was raised alive and will return in the latter days.

Yahya related to me from Malik from Nafi from Abdullah ibn Umar that the Messenger of Allah, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, said, "I dreamt at night that I was at the Ka'bah, and I saw a dark man like the most handsome of dark men you have ever seen. He had hair reaching to between his ears and his shoulders like the most excellent of such hair that you have seen. He had combed his hair, and water was dripping from it. He was leaning on two men or on the shoulders of two men doing tawaf around Kaba. I asked, 'Who is this?' It was said, 'al-Masih ibn Maryam.' Then we were with a man with wiry hair and blind in his right eye, as if it was a floating grape. I asked 'Who is this?' It was said to me, 'This is al-Masih ad-Dajjal.' " (Muwatta Imam Malik)

- **His esteemed mother is of the greatest women that ever lived**

An entire chapter in the Qur'an is named after her (Surah Maryam). Further, she also had her family name as the title of another chapter in the Qur'an (Surah Ale Imran).

Allah SWT says: *"And [mention] when the angels said, "O Maryam, indeed Allah has chosen you and purified you and chosen you above the women of the worlds. O Maryam, be devoutly obedient to your Lord and prostrate and bow with those who bow [in prayer]."*
(Qur'an - Surah Ale Imran: 42-43)

Rasulullah (ﷺ) said: *"The best of the women of the world are four: Maryam bint 'Imran, Aasiyah, the wife of Pharaoh, Khadijah bin Khuwailid, and Fatimah bint Muhammad the Messenger of Allah."* **(At Tirmidhi)**

- **He will return as a follower of the Prophet Muhammed (ﷺ)**

The Prophet (ﷺ) said: *"And the time that 'Isa will come back to you is near. He will come as a righteous, honest, leader."* **(Al-Bukhari and Muslim)**

Al-Hafidh al-'Iraqi said about this Hadeeth: *"He will come back as a righteous leader that rules with the Shariah, and he will not come with a new message or shariah that abrogates the former one. And he will not come as a prophet."* **(Tarih at-tathreeb: 8/117)**

Incorrect beliefs about Sayyidina Isa (alayhis salaam)

- **'Son of God'**

And they say, "The Most Merciful has taken [for Himself] a son." You have done an atrocious thing. The heavens almost rupture therefrom and the earth splits open and the mountains collapse in devastation. That they attribute to the Most Merciful a son. And it is not appropriate for the Most Merciful that He should take a son. There is no one in the heavens and earth but that he comes to the Most Merciful as a servant. **(Qur'an - Surah Maryam: 88-93)**

- **The trinity**

O People of the Scripture, do not commit excess in your religion or say about Allah except the truth. The Messiah, Isa, the son of Maryam, was but a messenger of Allah and His word which He directed to Mary and a soul [created at a command] from Him. So believe in Allah and His messengers. And do not say, "Three"; desist - it is better for you. Indeed, Allah is but one God. Exalted is He above having a son. To Him belongs whatever is in the heavens and whatever is on the earth. And sufficient is Allah as Disposer of affairs. **(Qur'an - Surah Nisa: 171)**

- **A deity**

And [beware the Day] when Allah will say, "O Isa, Son of Maryam, did you say to the people, 'Take me and my mother as deities besides Allah?'" He will say, "Exalted are You! It was not for me to say that to which I have no right. If I had said it, You would have known it. You know what is within myself, and I do not know what is within Yourself. Indeed, it is You who is Knower of the unseen. I said not to them except what You commanded me - to worship Allah, my Lord and your Lord. And I was a witness over them as long as I was among them; but when You took me up, You were the Observer over them, and You are, over all things, Witness. (Qur'an - Surah Maidah: 116-117)

- **Crucifixion**

And [for] their saying, "Indeed, we have killed the Messiah, Jesus, the son of Mary, the messenger of Allah ." And they did not kill him, nor did they crucify him; but [another] was made to resemble him to them. And indeed, those who differ over it are in doubt about it. They have no knowledge of it except the following of assumption. And they did not kill him, for certain. Rather, Allah raised him to Himself. And ever is Allah Exalted in Might and Wise. (Qur'an - Surah Nisa 157-158)

Sayyidina Isa (Alayhis Salaam) and Palestine

Sayyidina Abu Huraira (radiallahu anhu) reported: The Messenger of Allah (ﷺ) said, "I am the closest of the people to Jesus the son of Mary in this life and in the Hereafter." It was said, "How is that, O Messenger of Allah?" The Prophet said, "The prophets are brothers from one father with different mothers. They have one religion and there was no other prophet between us." (Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī 3258, Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim 2365)

And [mention] when Isa, the son of Maryam, said, "O children of Israel, indeed I am the messenger of Allah to you confirming what came before me of the Torah and bringing good tidings of a messenger to come after me, whose name is Ahmad." (Qur'an – Surah Saf:6)

The close bond between the Prophet Isa (alayhis salaam) and the Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) manifests itself in the commonality of the message of Tauheed they preached, as well as the succession in their prophethoods. It also coalesces in the Blessed Land of Shaam, of which Palestine is part.

- The Mother of Sayyidina Isa (alayhis salaam) was dedicated, by the vow of her mother, to the service of Masjid al-Aqsa. She grew up therein, praying and worshipping Allah and beholding His miracles and favours upon her such as being granted fruit that was out of season. It was in Masjid al-Aqsa that she was conveyed the news that she was to be blessed with the miraculous birth of Sayyidina Isa (alayhis salaam).
- Sayyidina Isa (alayhis salaam) is said, by Christian sources, to have been born in Bethlehem, and to have grown up in Nazareth – locations in Palestine close by to Masjid al Aqsa.
- Sayyidina Isa (alayhis salaam) undertook his Prophetic mission in the land of Palestine, performing numerous Divinely-ordained miracles and encountering opposition from his enemies.

- He was raised to the Heavens by Allah (without being crucified) from Jerusalem as well. It is narrated from Ummul Momineen Saffiya (radiallahu anha) that when she visited Bait Al-Maqdis and finished prayers in Al-Aqsa Mosque she climbed up to the Mount of Olives and prayed there as well and said: “this is the mountain from where Isa (Alayhis Salaam) was raised up to the heavens.” **(Al-Tasrih bima Tawatar fi Nuzul Al-Masih Hadith 74 cf. Tafsir Fath Al-Aziz Surah 95)**
- The Messenger of Allah, Sayyidina Muhammad (ﷺ) was too afforded a similar in-body experience from al-Quds during the night of Mi’raj, when he ascended, by Allah’s Will from Masjid al-Aqsa to the Heavens. It is noteworthy that both these celestial journeys began from al-Quds. Equally notable is that both these journeys were also a means of honour for each of the respective Prophets. Sayyidina Isa (alayhis salaam) was taken to Allah after the people he had been sent to rejected him and plotted his murder. The Messenger of Allah (ﷺ) was taken on Mi’raj after being rejected by the people of Makkah and Taif, and losing some of the most beloved persons to him.
- Sayyidina Isa (alayhis salaam) was among the thousands of Prophets who performed Salaah behind the Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) at Masjid al-Aqsa on the night of Mi’raj. Ibn Kathir (Allah have mercy on him) narrates a hadith, “Then I left and it was not more than a little while when a lot of people gathered, and someone called for the prayer and the prayer was established.” He (the Prophet) continued, “So we stood in lines waiting for someone to come and lead us, then Jibra’il took my hand and asked me to lead the prayer, and I did. After the end of the prayer Jibra’il asked me, ‘O Muhammad, do you know who prayed behind you?’ I said, ‘No’. He said, ‘Every Prophet sent by Allah (SWT) prayed behind you.’”

Masjid al-Aqsa is the only place where all the Prophets performed Salaah together in congregation at the same time. Ibn Abbas (radiallahu anhu) said, “There is not a single inch in Al-Quds where a Prophet has not prayed or an Angel not stood.”

- Sayyidina Isa (alayhis salaam) will, on his second coming, descend in the blessed land of Shaam – the land of which his birthplace forms a part of. The Prophet (ﷺ) mentioned, “Allah will send Maseeh ibn Maryam). Thus he will descend near the white eastern minaret of Damascus, clad in two yellow sheets, leaning on the shoulders of two angels.” **(Sahih Muslim)**
- On his second coming, Sayyidina Isa (alayhis salaam) will carry out his mission in the capacity of a follower of Nabi Muhammad (ﷺ). Amongst his tasks will be fighting against the Dajjal, and killing him. This will be realised in the land of Palestine.

Mujamma Ibn Al-Harith (radiallahu anhu) narrates that the Prophet (ﷺ) said, “Ibn Maryam (Jesus) will kill Al-Dajjal (the Anti-Christ) at the door of Ludd (a town in Palestine)”. **(Ahmad, Tirmidhi)**

The killing of Dajjal (false messiah and antichrist) by Sayyidina Isa (true messiah and Christ) will be highly symbolic due to Dajjal’s rampant materialism and ungodliness being the antithesis of the simplicity, abstinence and Tauheed preached by Sayyidina Isa (alayhis salaam)

Palestinian Muslims and Christians united under the yoke of Israeli occupation

- There are roughly 200 000 Palestinian Christians in the Holy Land, descendants of some of the oldest Christian communities in the world.
- Palestinian Muslims and Christians share the same plight; they are both suffering under the yoke of the Israeli occupation. Palestinian Christians suffer from the same restrictions, including on movement, applied to all other Palestinians living under Israel's 50-year-old military rule in the Occupied Territories.
- Palestinian Christians who still reside in Palestine evidently feel more affinity with their Muslim neighbours than with many Christians in the West. Christian Palestinians typically have warm relations with their Muslim neighbours, and perceive a closer religious bond with their Muslim neighbours as compared to their Jewish neighbours. Christian Palestinians are often surprised when certain (particularly evangelical) Christians from outside express strongly-religiously-driven support for Israel – a state which has driven many of them out of their birth communities and which practices discrimination against them.
- Religious liberty for Christians living under Occupation is severely restricted; the freedom of access to the holy places is denied under the pretext of security. Jerusalem and its holy places are out of bounds for many Christians and Muslims from the West Bank and the Gaza strip. Even Jerusalemites face restrictions during religious feasts. Palestinian clergy are regularly barred from entering Jerusalem.
- Jewish settlers continue a policy of so-called “price tag” attacks against Palestinians in response to Israeli government actions that displease them, such as the dismantling of settlement “outposts”. Often, such attacks take the form of vandalism and desecration of Muslim and Christian holy sites.
- There are at least 22 Israeli settlements built on land belonging to Bethlehem, the city where Christians believe Jesus was born. They surround the city and, along with Israel's wall, isolate it from Jerusalem and the rest of the West Bank.
- The Church of the Nativity, where Christians believe Jesus was born, is considered by UNESCO as an endangered heritage site.
- The Christian population of Palestine has been gradually declining for decades mainly due to emigration sparked by the unbearable conditions of living under Occupation.
- Palestinian Christians and Muslims have stood united in resisting Israeli Occupation and reaffirming each other's right to worship amidst Israeli interference. Prominent examples of Palestinian Christian solidarity with Muslims include: allowing the use of churches for Muslim prayers when mosques were demolished by Israeli airstrikes in Gaza; allowing the Athan to be called in defiance from churches when a ban on the Athan via loudspeakers was being debated by the Knesset; Christians, including clergymen, joining in the protests against metal detectors being placed outside al-Aqsa, as well as participating in the subsequent victory celebrations when they were removed.

The Inclusive Islamic Vision for Jerusalem

History bears witness that Muslim rule of sensitive areas such as Jerusalem did guarantee freedom of worship for Jews and Christians, and the provision of safety for all citizens of al-Quds. This is epitomised in the famous covenant of Sayyidina Umar (radiallahu anhu) which enshrined the safety of Christians in Jerusalem, their possessions and places of worship, whilst also facilitating the return of Jews to the Holy Land. The spirit of this covenant was upheld most magnanimously during the era of Salahuddin al Ayyubi (RA) in spite of the deep inter-religious wounds kindled by the Crusades. Even today, by the choice of differing denominations of Christians themselves, Muslims still hold the keys to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, Christianity's holiest site – an affirmation of Islam's ethos of accomodation.

Islam's vision of Jerusalem has, and will always be that of an open city, and the guarantees on safety and religious freedom it places a premium on, flow directly from its reverence of all the Prophets, and a deeply enshrined detestation of reviling what is sacred to others.

As ever darker clouds loom over al Quds today and the future status of the holy city hangs in the balance, it should be this openness enshrined in the inclusive Islamic vision for Jerusalem that must resurface and once again be afforded centre stage in deliberations over this most cherished real estate.

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