

# Contemporary Muslim Understanding of the Miracles of Jesus

**Kate Zebiri**

*School of Oriental and African Studies  
University of London  
London, England*

Modern Islamic thought has not on the whole been marked by the same degree of debate over the relationship between science and religion as has modern Christian thought. Although Muslims adhere to a Creationist perspective, there has been relatively little ink spilt over its alleged contradiction with Evolutionism. Similarly, demythologization has not had any widespread influence among Muslims; the Islamic tradition has not known a Hume or a Bultmann. The miracles which are reported in the Qurʾān, are still widely accepted as having occurred; in fact, there can be little doubt that a higher proportion of Muslims than Christians believe in the virgin birth.

Yet miracles, with the single possible exception of the doctrine of inimitability (*ijāz*) of the Qurʾān are less pivotal for Muslims than Christians. There is no consensus on Muḥammad having performed any (although some rather weak *ḥadīths* contain such reports), and the specific miracles reported in the Qurʾān take place at the hands of only two prophets, Moses and Jesus. These miracles are reported in the Qurʾān in a perfunctory way and are presented as simple demonstrations of God's power and of the veracity of his messengers. For Christians, on the other hand, the Incarnation and the Resurrection are central, and are often seen as the supreme miracles from which all others derive their significance.<sup>1</sup>

A well-known modern Muslim apologetic work, Maurice Bucaille's *The Bible, the Qurʾān and Science*, is, as the title indicates, concerned with the relationship between science and the respective scriptures. Bucaille holds that the Qurʾān (unlike the Bible) does not contain "a single statement that [is] assailable from a modern scientific point of view." (viii). Although much space is devoted to demonstrating this, on the subject of miracles, the author feels no need to defend them, but confines himself to the statement that "a belief in divine miracles and in science is quite com-

patible: one is on a divine scale, the other on a human one" (82). This simple acceptance probably derives from the belief that God is able to do all things, including suspending or contravening laws of nature which He Himself created. Bucaille remarks that "one should not be surprised by what He is able to achieve; by human standards it is stupendous, but for Him it is not" (82).

Muslim attitudes toward the miracles of Jesus are of intrinsic interest, not least because to study them allows one to observe the impact of changing social contexts on religious thought and self-understanding. Muslims have certainly not been immune to modern rationalism, and one does find a few, like the Indian reformer Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan (d. 1897), denying the possibility of miracles. Muslim-Christian religious debate and polemic is another context which has modified the views of some. However, because the Qurʾān so unambiguously reports the miracles of Jesus, the impact of these two contexts is not predictable in any straightforward way.

The topic also has relevance for other, broader issues of comparative religion, which will only be touched on briefly in what follows, but which could be fruitfully followed up in future studies. It would be interesting to explore, for example, how the same received traditions, such as the virgin and Jesus' healing miracles, came to have such differing overall significance in Islam and Christianity. Another area of interest is the relation of the Qurʾānic material to the biblical material. Evidently, the same stories are a source of inspiration in both scriptures, but the manner of their telling differs quite significantly. Muslims are highly sensitive to any suggestion of Qurʾānic "borrowing" from or dependence on the Bible, since such suggestions have been used in the past to discredit Muḥammad and therefore Islam. However, on the question of dependence, it is worth remembering that, on the one hand, the Qurʾān makes no claim to be telling new or original stories, and, on the other, recent studies have emphasized the originality of form, if not content, of the Qurʾānic stories.<sup>2</sup>

Moving on from the origins of the two faiths, the way in which this material has been integrated into Muslims' self-definition and used to support a distinctively Islamic, as opposed to Christian, theology, is of no less interest. One could posit a dialectical relationship between the Qurʾānic text and Islamic theology, with the former constituting the starting point for the latter, but the latter gaining its own momentum and in turn having an important influence on Qurʾānic interpretation. This would be particularly true of the more ambiguous or seemingly anomalous elements, such as the ways in which Jesus appears to be unique among prophets in the Qurʾān.

## The Miracles of Jesus in the New Testament

A brief look at the miracles of Jesus in the New Testament will clarify any contrasts or original features in the Qur'anic treatment of them, and will be useful in discerning to what extent Muslim interpreters are influenced by, or aware of, Christian sources.

Jesus is not the only biblical figure to perform miracles, although his miracles are usually seen as unique by Christians in that he seems to do them in his own authority. That the healing power seems somehow to have inhered in Jesus, without the need for him to wait on God or consciously ask for it, is illustrated by the occasions when individuals were healed merely by touching his cloak, even when he was not attending to them (e.g. Mk. 5:25-34; 6:56). The Old Testament contains accounts of miracles performed by Moses, Elijah and Elisha, among others, which include instances of healing the sick, raising the dead, and multiplying food. Disciples of Jesus also worked miracles, but the synoptic Gospels state that Jesus delegated authority to them for this purpose. (Mt. 10; Lk. 9; Mk. 6).

In the Gospels, Jesus' miracles are set in the context of his teaching and ministry. They have traditionally been divided by Christians into "healing" miracles and a smaller number of "nature" miracles. The healing miracles invariably take place in the context of an encounter between Jesus and the one seeking help. For Christians, the expression of compassion which the healing miracles embody is one of the most significant ways in which Jesus provides an illustration of the character of God. There seems also to be a link between physical and spiritual healing, particularly in the case of the healing of the paralytic, where Jesus simultaneously forgives the man's sins and links the cure with the forgiveness (Mk. 2:9-11). Kenneth Cragg observes that "the transforming power of the kingdom of God in personal life resembles the recovery of new physical health ... The tyranny of a crippled physical condition symbolizes the bondage in which evil holds the human soul," and "the one liberation dramatizes the other" (143).

Miracles do not appear, either in the Old or the New Testaments, to have been primarily or necessarily a proof of the authenticity of a prophet's mission. For one thing, those who are ungodly are also sometimes said to have the ability to work wonders (e.g. Mt. 7:22, 24:24; cf. Dt. 13:2-3).<sup>3</sup> The healing scenes seem to have the character not of a demonstration but of fulfilling the needs of individuals, and Jesus is sometimes portrayed as asking the healed person not to tell others of the healing (e.g. Mt. 8:4; Mk. 5:43). Furthermore, he rebukes and refuses to gratify sceptics who ask for a sign (e.g. Mk. 8:12). However, some Christian theologians have emphasized the evidentiary aspect of miracles, for which some biblical support can be

found. In the context of Christian-Muslim polemics, for example, some have sought to prove Jesus' superiority to Muḥammad by the fact that Muḥammad allegedly wrought no miracles.<sup>5</sup>

### The Miracles of Jesus in the Qur'ān

According to Lane's lexicon, the Islamic theological definition of a prophetic miracle, or *mu'jiza* (which is distinguished from a *karāmah*, a miracle performed by a saint or a righteous man) is:

an event at variance with the usual course [of nature] produced by means of one who lays claim to the office of the prophet in contending with those who disacknowledge [his claim], in such a manner as renders them unable to produce the like thereof; or an event breaking through, or infringing, the usual course [of nature] (*amr kbāriq li'l 'ādab*), inviting to good and happiness, coupled with a claim to the prophetic office, and intended to manifest the veracity of him who claims to be an apostle of God.

In the Qur'ān, the miracles of Jesus are described in two passages: 3:49 and 5:110.<sup>6</sup> Qur'ān 3:49 attributes the following words to Jesus:

I have come to you, with a Sign from your Lord, in that I make for you of clay, the figure of a bird, and breathe into it, and it becomes a bird by God's permission. And I heal the blind, and the lepers, and I bring the dead to life by God's permission; and I declare to you what you eat, and what you store in your houses. Surely therein is a sign for you if you did believe.

Qur'ān 5:110 portrays God's words to Jesus on the Day of Judgement:

O Jesus son of Mary! Remember my favor to you and your mother. Behold! I strengthened you with the Holy spirit, so that you spoke to people in the cradle and in old age ... And behold! You make out of the clay the figure of a bird, by My Permission. And you breathe into it, and it becomes a bird by My permission, and you heal the blind, and the lepers, by My permission. And behold! You bring forth the dead by My permission. And behold! I restrained the Children of Israel from (violence to) you, when you showed them the clear signs, and the unbelievers among them said: "This is nothing but evident magic."

Commentators differ slightly on the exact number of Jesus' miracles according to the Qur'ān. They agree on four basic miracles: breathing life into clay birds (where the above translation has the singular, some commentators understand the plural), healing the blind and the lepers, and raising the dead. Most add to this list speaking as an infant in the cradle (also mentioned in 3:46), and the ability to foretell things not immediately visible, which depends on the interpretation of the relevant phrase of 3:49.

Translations of the Qur'ān inevitably reflect particular interpretations, so that, for example, Yūsef Ali's translation: "I declare to you what ye eat, and what ye store in your houses," accomodates his belief that "this clause refers generally to a prophetic knowledge of what is not known to other people."<sup>7</sup> Muḥammad Asad, on the other hand, who denies the supernatural aspect, has: "I shall let you know what you may eat and what you should store up in your houses."<sup>8</sup>

Perhaps the Qur'anic treatment of Jesus' miracles is as significant for what it does not say as for what it does say. Like other events and stories in the Qur'ān, they are recounted succinctly, without any extrinsic detail as to time or place. None of the nature miracles, such as the calming of the storm, walking on water or the changing of water into wine, are referred to. In contrast to the Gospel accounts, one is told nothing about the recipients of the healing miracles. This style is characteristic of the Qur'ān, which tends to place emphasis on the lesson to be drawn from a story rather than the story itself. The Qur'ān's explicit reference to Jesus' miracles as a "sign" from God is generally understood by Muslims as being a sign or proof of the authenticity of his prophethood and mission.<sup>9</sup> This is supported by other Qur'anic verses (2:87; 2:253), which state that Jesus was given "clear proofs" (*bayyināt*).

The creation of birds out of clay is the only one of the Qur'anic miracles which is not mentioned in the Gospels. However, it does occur, with additional details and minor variations, in the apocryphal Gospel or Infancy Story of Thomas. One can therefore assume that some early Christians counted this among Jesus' miracles.

A prominent element in the Qur'anic accounts is the repeated mention of God's permission. Muslim commentators have often laid emphasis on this phrase in order to minimize the role of Jesus in initiating and carrying out the miracles. This contrasts with the Gospel accounts, which, as indicated above, usually portray Jesus as acting on his own initiative and in his own authority.

The subject of miracles recurs in the Qur'ān in the context of demands on the part of the Prophet's detractors for proof of his mission. In

the Meccan period in particular, Muḥammad's opponents repeatedly ask for a "sign" or a miracle to substantiate his prophetic status. The Qur'anic response is that although God is able to do all things, He declines to effect such miracles through Muḥammad, for a variety of reasons: because they still would not believe (e.g. 6:109); or in order to emphasize and reinforce Muḥammad's human, as opposed to divine, status (17:90ff); or because the Qur'ān should be sufficient for them (29:50-1).<sup>11</sup> It is hinted that the Qur'ān itself is in fact such a sign (29:49), although some ambiguity arises from the fact that the word for sign (*āyah*) also denotes a Qur'anic verse.

In the Qur'ān, the miracles of Jesus do not appear to be central either to an understanding of prophets or to an understanding of Jesus. Other verses in the Qur'ān could be understood as distinguishing Jesus from, even elevating him over, other prophets; foremost among these are references to him as the "Word" of God and a "spirit from Him" (4:171; 3:45). Yet these are offset by the oft-repeated denial that Jesus shares in the divinity through sonship or otherwise.

David Thomas has analyzed some of the main features of the early Muslim polemical treatment of the miracles of Jesus. For the earliest period, i.e. the third/ninth century, he observes the almost ubiquitous comparison of Jesus with the Old Testament prophets in order to demonstrate that Jesus was not unique even in the Bible. This approach was based on the assumption that Christians saw the miracles of Jesus as primary evidence of his divinity, whereas in fact they were more often seen by Christians as "expressions rather than proofs of his divinity."<sup>12</sup> Thomas traces an evolution from this piecemeal approach to the biblical text, citing lists of other prophetic miracles, to a more sophisticated approach which had greater recourse to rational and philosophical arguments, as this topic became assimilated into the concerns of the evolving discipline of *kalām* (Islamic theology).

In classical *tafsīrs* (Qur'anic commentaries), the matter was approached rather differently.<sup>13</sup> Commentators were concerned less with biblical elements or philosophical issues, and tended to confine themselves to direct exposition of the Qur'anic verses in question. The influence of interreligious debate was less pronounced but still perceptible, for example, in the insistence that the verses do not impute any superhuman status to Jesus.

This article will attempt to indicate elements of both continuity and discontinuity with the classical approaches. Two types of literature which tend to address the topic directly are observed, corresponding to the two *genres* described in the preceding paragraphs: modern *tafsīr*, and the rather different and less scholarly popular Muslim writings on Christianity which

are available in Islamic bookshops in both Muslim and non-Muslim countries, often being quite widely distributed. Other more literary writings, such as biographies of Jesus and poetic or fictional works, often yield a view of Jesus closer to Christian understandings; however, his miracles do not usually feature prominently in these.

*Tafsīr* is a religious *genre* par excellence and tends to be fairly conservative when compared to other types of sources. There are relatively few modern comprehensive (i.e. verse by verse, or *musalsala*) *tafsīrs*. The *mufasssīrūn* (Qur'anic commentators) consulted for the purposes of this article include the Egyptian reformer Muḥammad 'Abduh (d. 1905), who is sometimes known as "the father of modern *tafsīr*," former Shaykh al-Azhar Aḥmad Muṣṭafā Al-Marāghī (d. 1945); Egyptian scholars Muḥammad Maḥmūd Hījāzī and 'Abd al-Karīm al-Khatīb; the activist Islamist and scholar Sayyid Quṭb (d. 1966); the Tunisian scholar and reformist Muḥammad al-Ṭāhir ibn 'Āshūr; the Iranian Shī'ite scholar Muḥammad Ḥusayn Ṭabāṭabā'ī; and the present Shaykh al-Azhar, Shaykh Muḥammad Ṭanṭawī.<sup>14</sup> Also briefly looked at are the English annotated translations of the Qur'ān by the Ahmadi scholar Mālik Ghulām Farīd and the Austrian convert to Islam, Muḥammad Asad.

In popular writing on Christianity, one finds a rather broader and freer treatment of the issues than one finds in *tafsīr*. In them, exigencies of interreligious debate and polemic sometimes override classical Islamic doctrine, to the extent that miracles may even be denied. Below, the treatment of miracles is observed in the well-known *Muḍāḥarāt fī'l-Naṣrāniyyah* (Lectures on Christianity - Cairo: Dār al-Fikr al-'Arabī, n.d.) by the Egyptian religious scholar Muḥammad Abū Zahrā', as well as in a number of less erudite works, all by Pakistani writers: Ahmad Azhar's *Christianity in History* (Lahore: Sh. Muḥammad Ashrāf, 1991), M.H. Durrani's *The Qur'anic Facts about Jesus* (Delhi: Noor Publishing House, 1992), and Kauser Niazi's *Mirror of Trinity* (Lahore: Sh. Muḥammad Ashrāf, 1991).

### **Philosophical Arguments Concerning the Possibility and/or Desirability of Miracles**

Most commentators do not feel the need to mount a rational defense of miracles. In the Qur'ān, just prior to the account of Jesus' miracles (3:47), Mary is reported as asking: "How can I have a son when no man has touched me?" The reply is: "Thus God creates what He wills. If He decrees a matter, He simply says 'Be' and it is." This emphasis on the sovereign and unlimited will of God naturally influences commentators' treatment of the verses which follow.

Quṭb draws a link between Jesus' miracles and the manner of his

birth, but uses this link to refute any ascription of divinity to Jesus, on the grounds that "if God is able to bring about these miracles at the hand of one of His creation, then He is able to create that one in a unique way ... there is no need, then, for all the doubts and legends which have grown up around this special birth, when the matter is referred to the unfettered will of God, and when humans do not limit God, may He be glorified, by that which is familiar to humans."<sup>15</sup> Quṭb is dismissive of speculation as to how miracles are effected. In connection with the creation of birds from clay, he states simply that "we can't know how, because we don't know until today how God creates life, or how life is disseminated into living things." When God's will is made paramount, the human intermediary becomes almost irrelevant; Quṭb says, for example, that "He who gives life for the first time is able to restore it when He wills."<sup>16</sup> This is reminiscent of the Qur'anic rebuke to the Meccan pagans who disbelieved in the resurrection (e.g. 17:51).

Al-Marāghī has the fullest theoretical treatment of miracles, exploring both their relation to science and their religious value. He assumes that the burden of proof is on those who wish to deny, rather than uphold, the possibility of miracles, commenting that those who deny the virgin birth "do not have a rational proof of its impossibility." He goes on to say: "every day we see the occurrence of new phenomena in the universe, some of which have known other causes, so they're called discoveries or inventions, while others don't, so they're called freaks of nature [*falatāt al-ṭabī'ah*]." He adds that the intelligent person should deduce from this that causes (*asbāb*) are not a rational necessity.

Others also insist on God's ability to dispense with means. Ṭanṭawī, for example, sees miracles as demonstrating that "things are not brought about by causality [*illiyah*], as the materialists say," but only by God's will. If the necessity of causality is dispensed with, an atomistic view of the universe, which was characteristic of the mainstream 'Ash'arite theology of classical Islam, makes objections to miracles on scientific grounds redundant by removing the distinction between miracles and the myriad other actions by which God sustains the universe. Thus, al-Marāghī states that "if God were to cause the sun to rise in the West instead of the East, this would be a miracle from the human point of view, although both movements are of God's doing, and there is no difference between them."

However, when al-Marāghī addresses certain scientific objections to miracles, he places rather more emphasis on the constancy of natural laws. One such objection is the reasoning that had certain modern inventions been available in the time of the prophets, they would have been considered miracles. Al-Marāghī states that this constitutes a misunderstanding of



the true spirit of miracles, since scientific inventions are based on the laws of nature; i.e. unchanging scientific principles. Even when there are apparent anomalies, it is only because certain principles have yet to be discovered. Modern inventions such as electricity and the telephone, no matter how extraordinary they appeared to be at first, were nevertheless based on these unchanging laws and principles. While scientific inventions depend on natural forces, miracles are of a different order, for they represent the creation of a new law. By way of illustration, he draws a contrast between a person being enabled to enter fire without being burned (as in the Qur'anic story of Abraham - 21:69), and the modern invention of fireproof clothing, which would achieve the same effect but without contravening the laws of nature.

Al-Marāghī believes that the main purpose of miracles is to remind humans of God's power; without them, the unfailing regularity of the laws of nature lulls people into complacency, and supports the view of those who forget or deny that there is something beyond nature. In effect, He who created the laws in the first place draws attention to Himself by contravening them on occasion.<sup>21</sup>

Al-Marāghī, Ṭantawī and Niazi expound a theory which was first put forward by the classical *mufassir* Ibn Kathīr (d. 774/1373), which provides a rationalization for the particular type of miracle brought by each prophet.<sup>22</sup> According to this view, each prophet brought miracles which were suited to the people to whom he was sent, and which was most calculated to impress them. Thus, Moses, who lived in an age in which there were accomplished magicians, was able to outdo them when his "magic" appeared superior to theirs; Jesus came at a time when medicine was highly prized and developed, and was thus given healing miracles; and the Arabs, to whom Muḥammad was sent, prized eloquence and were accomplished in poetry, so a literary miracle in the form of the Qur'ān was best suited to them. For obvious reasons, this evolutionary theory of miracles has become popular in Muslim apologetic writings.

Al-Marāghī also has more than most to say on the *way* in which God effects miracles. He believes that God observes the principle of gradualism (*tadarruj*), since if miracles were too unrelated to everyday life, they might lead to adverse effects such as nervous illnesses in those who witness them. Therefore, there is usually an element of similarity between the miracle and the normal course of events. Thus, a clay bird bears a strong resemblance to a live bird, and the act of blowing on the clay lessens the shock by creating an expectation of something happening on the part of the watchers. However, al-Marāghī does not see this as detracting from the miraculous

element; the healing of a blind person by medical means and the miraculous healing of organic and incurable blindness are completely different. Thus, God can choose to use an agency or intermediary (*wāsiṭa*) in order to lessen the shock, although He has no need of any.<sup>23</sup>

Most commentators make some reference to the function of miracles as an authentication of the prophet who performs them. Both ‘Abduh and al-Marāghī state that “it is the custom of God the Almighty to cause miracles to happen at the hands of His prophets when their people ask for them, and to make faith dependent on them.”<sup>24</sup> However, the belief that faith cannot be coerced gives rise to some ambivalence on this. ‘Abduh, for example, later points out that miracles, no matter how impressive, do not in themselves necessitate belief, but there must be a predisposition on the part of the witness.<sup>25</sup> Similarly, al-Marāghī’s emphasis on gradualism means that there may be an element of doubt on the part of witnesses as to whether, for example, a healing has taken place by natural or supernatural means. However, he does not explicitly say this, and in fact states that bringing the dead to life, unlike other miracles, leaves no room for doubt.<sup>26</sup>

Al-Khaṭīb comments on the transitory nature of miracles, which are “the daughter of their hour, then they disappear and are seen no more ... rather like a flash of lightening.” Were it not for this, he points out that there would be no test, and therefore no virtue in believing in them; humans would have no choice and belief would be coerced. He therefore gives credit to the view, which was contained in some of the traditional extra-Qur’anic Muslim material, that the bird which was created from clay flew off immediately, leaving the watchers with an element of uncertainty.<sup>27</sup> He further comments that despite humans’ inability to perform or imitate miracles, “foolish people may still contest them, and doubters and disputers may still come up with their arguments and explanations.”<sup>28</sup>

A small minority of Muslims actually deny the possibility of miracles, whether for rational or polemical reasons. Some comment adversely on the centrality of miracles to Christianity, as a proof of its inherent irrationality, which is contrasted with the rationality of Islam. Azhar, in *Christianity in History*, comments that “miracles are of the essence of Christianity; in a sense, miracles *are* Christianity,” and this leads him to the conclusion that “if miracles are incredible, Christianity is false” (54). By contrast, “Islam relies on truth itself, without the support of miracles,” in fact “the miracle of Islam is rationalism” (172-73).

Azhar gives a critique of miracles which owes much to Western sources, in particular to the thought of the French philosopher Ernest Renan. He states that they appeal to the superstitious and the credulous,

and constitute a form of bribery to induce belief (56,68), that they risk becoming ends in themselves instead of an aid to moral teachings, and that they become a reactionary force by offering compensation to the downtrodden (61).

Azhar believes that in fact "Jesus did not perform any miracles in the sense of an outside agency intervening and formally derogating [*sic*] the rules of nature. Nor did anybody else" (67). Unlike the *mufassirūn*, Azhar refers to the account of Jesus' miracles contained in the Gospels, without reference to the Qur'anic account. The Gospel miracles are refuted by various, sometimes contradictory means. At one point, he suggests that they were interpolated by Paul (58), while elsewhere he explains that such things as demon-possession were symptoms of hysteria or hypochondria, which could also be cured by "a mere touch of the physician" (67). He also speaks of "the extreme simplicity of the minds of Jesus' disciples," who "believed in phantoms," and "imagined that they were surrounded by miracles; they were complete strangers to the positive science of the time" (15); he even quotes with approval the opinion of Renan that Jesus believed in miracles because he "*had not the least idea of an order of Nature regulated by fixed laws*" (60). Azhar further cites Renan to the effect that the occurrence of miracles has never been scientifically verified (65), and to ask why they only occur in Christian countries when the need should be greater in non-Christian countries, concluding on the latter question that "such miracles and apparitions presuppose a quantum of credulity which is available only in Christian countries" (69-70).

Durrani, in *The Qur'anic Facts about Jesus*, also denies that Jesus performed any miracles (although he accepts in principle that Muḥammad did), and shares many points in common with Azhar; however, unlike Azhar, Durrani does at least refer in passing to the Qur'anic miracles of Jesus, and, interestingly, he singles out the one which is not contained in the Gospels, namely the creation of clay birds. He argues that this must be understood as a parable, since "a prophet's dignity is much above such actions as the making of toy birds," and "the act of creation is not attributable to any but the Divine Being" (30).<sup>29</sup> He is also ambivalent about the virgin birth, on the one hand maintaining the classical view that "the birth of Jesus is similar to the birth of Adam," while on the other vehemently rejecting "the lying dogma of birth by a Virgin Mother" (16).

*Tafsirs* are generally silent about the alleged miracles of Muḥammad, whereas some popular works which acknowledge the possibility of miracles do mention them. One such is Niazi's *Mirror of Trinity*. In strong contrast to the rationalizing tendencies of Azhar, Niazi accepts all

the accounts of the miracles of Muḥammad which are contained in the *ḥadīth* literature. These include accounts of stones saluting him, a pillar weeping, and a tree uprooting itself and coming before him and bearing witness to the unity of God and the prophethood of Muḥammad at his command (35); these miracles are said to be superior to those of Jesus precisely because they “defy all rational explanation” (36). However, Niazi sees the miracle of the Qurʾān as excelling all others, since it is a miracle appealing to the intellect rather than sensual perception (34).

### Commentary on the Specific Miracles of Jesus and Their Significance

The majority of the modern *mufasssirūn* do not show any particular concern to minimize the miracles of Jesus *per se*. In addition to the four miracles mentioned in both Qurʾān 3:49 and 5:110, they mostly also consider the speaking in the cradle and the telling of what is stored up in houses to be miraculous. Furthermore, almost all state (as did the classical *mufasssirūn*) that the word for “blind” (*ʿama*) means “born blind,” and therefore involves organic and incurable blindness; they also make a point of stating that there was no cure for leprosy in Jesus’ day.<sup>30</sup>

In the case of the miracles of creation and restoring to life, however, there is a concern to minimize or restrict the *role* of Jesus. As in the classical commentaries, many synonyms are supplied for the verb “to create” (*khalaqa*), such as fashioning or measuring (*taqdir*) and arranging (*tartīb*), in order to show that the word may have a different meaning according to whether the subject is divine or human.<sup>31</sup> Since the Qurʾān almost always attributes the verb *khalaqa* to God, extra-Qurʾanic sources are sometimes cited, as in the classical works, to show how it can mean fashioning and making when attributed to humans. Ṭabāṭabāʿī, for example, confirms that *khalaqa* can simply mean putting together the components of something, and that the Qurʾanic verse “God is the best of creators” intimates that the verb can be attributed to humans as well as God.<sup>32</sup>

Some refer, as did the classical commentators al-Rāzī (d.606/1209) and abarsī (d.548/1153), to the various stages involved in the creation of the clay bird(s) in order to distinguish the role of Jesus from that of God.<sup>33</sup> Ṭaṅṭāwī, for example, says that of the three stages: fashioning the clay into the form of a bird, blowing on it, and it coming to life, Jesus did the first two while God did the third.<sup>34</sup> Similarly, ʿAbduh, paraphrasing Qurʾān 5:110, states that God “makes you [i.e. Jesus] a means (*sabab*) in causing life to enter that clay form; you do the fashioning and breathing and God is the one who creates the bird.”<sup>35</sup>

Neal Robinson has observed the parallelism between the Qur'anic description of God's creation of humankind, in which He breathes His spirit into clay (15:29, 23:12), and the miracle of the clay birds. Three key words occur in both accounts: to breathe (*nafakha*), clay (*tin*) and creation (*khalq*). He remarks on the failure of the classical *mufassirūn*, with the exception of al-Marāghī, who states that the creation of clay birds is a "representation" (*tambīl*) of the creation of Adam and the whole of humankind, since miracles in general are aimed at reminding human beings that there is a Creator.<sup>37</sup>

As in the classical works, almost all the *mufassirūn* comment on the phrase "by His permission," seeing it as a sign of Jesus' "servanthood" (*ubūdiyyah*).<sup>38</sup> Some, including Ṭabāṭabā'ī and Ibn 'Āshūr,<sup>39</sup> see this as a direct rebuke to Christians, whether in Muḥammad's day or in the future, and an indication to them that they were wrong to see in the miracles of Jesus a proof of his divinity. Synonyms for the word "permission" (*idhn*), grammatically attributed to God, perform the opposite function to the synonyms which are supplied for "creation," grammatically attributed to Jesus, in that they strengthen rather than dilute the original meaning. Thus, as in Ibn Kathīr's commentary, words such as "command" (*amr*), "will" (*mash'ra*), or "bringing into being/agency" (*takwīn*) are supplied.<sup>40</sup>

Several are unwilling to speculate on extrinsic details, in contrast to the classical commentators who often included legendary material, weak *ḥadīth* and *isrā'iliyyāt* (reports from converted Christians and Jews) to supplement the Qur'anic account. Al-Marāghī, for example, states that it is not necessary to specify the type of bird Jesus created, since the Qur'ān and Sunna did not specify it, and one should not go beyond the text of the verse.<sup>41</sup> Ṭanṭawī, however, refers to the story that Jesus raised Shem, the son of Noah, as related in the commentaries of al-Rāzī, Qurṭubī (d. 567/1172) and even al-Zamakhsharī (d. 538/1144).<sup>42</sup>

Some of the popular Muslim writers are less hesitant to give credence to legendary material about Jesus. The well-known *Jesus, Prophet of Islam*, by 'Ata ur-Rahim<sup>43</sup> includes an appendix on "Jesus in ḥadīth and Muslim Traditions." Many of these accounts were included in classical works such as those of Tha'labī and al-Ghazālī, and they are said to have been "originally gathered together by the earlier followers of Jesus, especially those who spread to Arabia and North Africa" (221), and whose descendants embraced Islam and thus preserved the accounts for Muslim posterity. These narratives, which have been particularly cherished by Sufis, portray Jesus as an ascetic and a wise man, but also one who performs miracles in addition to those contained in the Qur'ān and the New

Testament.<sup>44</sup>

Only Ṭaṇṭawī mentions a matter which was frequently raised by classical Muslim writers who wished to show that Jesus was not unique vis-à-vis the Old Testament prophets who performed miracles, namely that Jesus engaged in prayer before undertaking them.<sup>45</sup> The only possible biblical support for this, the words of Jesus as he speaks to God just prior to raising Lazarus (John 11:41-2), is cited by ‘Abduh and following him, al-Marāghī.<sup>46</sup> Although no explicit reason is given for the citation, it is almost certainly in order to illustrate Jesus’ dependence on God in this act.

Ibn ‘Āshūr pays particular attention to the miracle of the healing of lepers. He discusses the medical symptoms of leprosy, its social consequences in Jesus’ day (i.e. ostracism), and even its place in Islamic law, namely that it is considered to be one of the hidden defects in a spouse which, if it comes to light after the marriage, gives the right of annulment to the other spouse. He therefore considers this to have been “the most important and useful of his miracles, in terms of both religious and temporal affairs (*dīnan wa-dunyan*).”<sup>47</sup>

While none of the *mufasssīrūn* refer to miracles of Jesus referred to in the New Testament but not the Qur’ān, such as the nature miracles, some do enumerate specific instances of raising the dead as reported in the Gospels.<sup>48</sup> Ibn ‘Āshūr includes in this list the Transfiguration (Mt. 17), understanding it as a miracle in which Jesus temporarily brought Moses and Elijah back to life.<sup>49</sup>

Very few Muslim writers see Jesus’ miracles as denoting anything distinctive about his mission. Hījāzī mentions briefly that “Jesus’ kingdom was spiritual and not material,” but does not elaborate on this.<sup>50</sup> ‘Abduh refers to the Sufi belief that Jesus was able to perform miracles because his spiritual aspect predominated over his physical aspect, which in turn was due to the role of the Spirit in his birth.<sup>51</sup> This understanding makes Jesus more directly instrumental in the miracles, since he brings them about by means of an inherent faculty (*malakat rāsikab*). Thus, “if he breathed some of his spirit into a moist clay figure, life entered into it and it became animated, and if he, with his spiritual nature, turned his attention to a spirit which had departed from its body, he was able to summon it and restore it to the body for a time.”<sup>52</sup>

Abū Zahrāʾ, in *Muḥāḍarāt fi’l-Naṣrāniyyah*, states that “Jesus (peace be upon him) was sent to give the good news of the spirit, and to banish the pleasures which were consuming peoples’ souls in those days” (22). He goes on to discuss the reason for the particular character of Jesus’ miracles. In contrast to al-Marāghī and Ṭaṇṭawī, he rejects the theory put forward by

Ibn Kathīr, on the grounds that the theory does not fit the facts. Relying on Renan, he points out that the Jews of Jesus' time were not in fact accomplished in medicine. Abū Zahrā' sees the true reason as being the Jewish emphasis on the external, material world and their effective denial of the reality of the spiritual world. Thus, the creation of a bird, and, in particular, the blowing on it, illustrates that life is imparted by means of something non-corporeal. The raising of the dead is even more illustrative of this, in that even after the corpse has begun to decay, Christ's call to it brings a spiritual dimension to bear on it so that the process of decomposition is actually reversed. This miracle also challenged the prevailing disbelief in the resurrection of the body. The miracles are therefore "an announcement of the spirit and a proof of its existence," and in accordance with the nature of Jesus' mission (25-27).

The spiritual (but not necessarily distinctive) nature of Jesus' mission is also emphasized by those who deny miracles on rational or other grounds. Mālik Ghulām Farīd gives metaphorical interpretations of the miracles of Jesus as reported in the Qur'ān. Thus, the word for "bird" is said to denote "a highly spiritual man who soars high into spiritual regions." The possibility of Jesus actually having created a bird from clay is denied on the grounds that it is not mentioned in the New Testament, and, had it occurred, it would have lent support to the claim of divinity for Jesus; instead, the account signifies that "if ordinary men of humble origin but possessing the inherent capacity for growth and development came into contact with him [i.e. Jesus] and accepted his Message, they would undergo a complete transformation of their lives."<sup>53</sup>

Similarly, with regard to the healing miracles, Ghulām Farīd says that "the Prophets of God are spiritual physicians; they give eyes to those that have lost spiritual sight, and hearing to those who are spiritually dead." The word for blind, *a'mab*, would therefore mean "such a person as possesses the light of faith but being weak of resolve cannot stand trials. He sees in daytime, i.e. so long as there are no trials and the sun of faith shines forth unclouded, but when the night comes, i.e. when there are trials and sacrifices to be made, he loses his spiritual vision and stands still." Likewise, the word for leprous denotes "one who is imperfect in faith, having patches of diseased skin among healthy ones." Ghulām Farīd insists that "those actually dead are never restored to life in this world. Such a belief is diametrically opposed to the whole Qur'anic teaching."<sup>54</sup>

Muḥammad Asad has similarly metaphorical interpretations of Jesus' miracles. He points out that the Arabic word for bird, *ṭayr*, was used to denote fortune or destiny in pre-Islamic poetry, concluding that "in the parabolic manner so beloved by him, Jesus intimated to the children of Israel

that out of the humble clay of their lives he would fashion for them the vision of a soaring destiny." The raising of the dead is taken to refer to those who are spiritually dead, and this is supported by reference to another Qur'anic verse (6:122) which uses the word dead in this metaphorical sense. Likewise, the healing of the blind and the leper would denote "an inner regeneration of people who were spiritually diseased and blind to the truth."<sup>55</sup>

## Conclusions

Within *tafsīr*, there is a fair degree of continuity with the classical works as far as direct commentary on the verses in question is concerned. As before, the miracles of Jesus are not seen as any cause for embarrassment, and are integrated into an Islamic understanding of prophethood. As in classical commentaries, reference to the text of the Gospels is relatively rare, and there is no reference to Christian understandings of Jesus' miracles. However, *tafsīr* has always been a vehicle for response to new circumstances, and one new element one finds is the response to the challenge of the scientific age, and the resulting theoretical discussion of miracles to be found in several *tafsīrs*.<sup>56</sup> Such discussions are generally firmly rooted in Islamic theology and the understanding of God's unlimited will, and avoid too much abstract discussion or speculation.

Popular works are far more likely to engage in speculation on various issues. It is in them that one can most easily discern the influence of interreligious polemics. In these, there is more reference to the biblical text and also to Western authors, but only for purposes of refutation of what is perceived to be the Christian position. In the context of the denial of Jesus' divinity, one does occasionally still find reference to the miracles of the Old Testament prophets, although these were not referred to in the works surveyed above.<sup>57</sup> The denial of Jesus' miracles, where this occurs, does not necessarily arise from a rationalizing tendency. In fact, Muḥammad Asad is the only one whose denial of them is part of a consistent hermeneutic, as evidenced by his metaphorical interpretations of other supernatural elements in the Qur'ān.<sup>58</sup> Although Ghulām Farīd's treatment of Jesus' miracles is similar to that of Asad, he does not deny or minimize other supernatural elements in the Qur'ān, and accepts at face value, for example, the account of the angels supporting and strengthening the Muslims at the Battles of Badr and Uḥud (Qur'ān 3:124-5; 8:9). His affiliation with the Ahmadiyya, who have a tradition of anti-Christ polemic originating with their founder in the nineteenth century, may be a more significant factor.<sup>59</sup> The Ahmadis' denial that there was anything special or mysterious about the end of Jesus' earthly life, contra the view of many other Muslims, is another example of



de-emphasizing the apparently supernatural elements in the Qur'anic portrayal of Jesus. Azhar, Durrani and Niazi all mention in their works that they are responding to Christian missionary activities and literature, which suggests that there is a direct or indirect response to arguments that have been put forward at different times and places by Christian missionaries. Obvious examples would be the link between Jesus' miracles and his alleged divinity, or the claim that Jesus is superior to Muḥammad.

The miracles of Jesus are rarely, if ever, interpreted as a manifestation of God's compassion. Although al-Khaṭīb comments that Jesus "came as a sign of God's mercy" to his people, this is in the sense that all prophets are a manifestation of God's mercy, and, in the case of Jesus, the particular aspect of mercy was his lightening of certain aspects of religious law.<sup>60</sup> Neither al-Khaṭīb nor anyone else describes Jesus as a mercy in the context of his miracles.<sup>61</sup> This may seem surprising, since Muslims often emphasize God's compassion, but may be explained by the fact that to make Jesus so directly instrumental in the dispensing of God's compassion is felt to associate him too closely with the divine character. Nor do any of the exegetes or writers make any connection between the healing miracles of Jesus and the practices in popular, Sufi-influenced forms of Islam, whereby supplication is made to God and to saints or holy men for the healing of illnesses.

The majority of Muslim sources accept the fact of miracles having occurred at the hand of Jesus, but do not accord them significance beyond being a manifestation of God's power and a validation of Jesus' prophethood. The few commentators who draw nearer to Christian understandings of the spiritual significance of Jesus' miracles (which imply a less passive role for Jesus) usually do so at the expense of the physical dimension, by interpreting the miracles metaphorically. Perhaps it is difficult to accommodate both spiritual and physical dimensions in the absence of a doctrine of Incarnation.

## Endnotes

- 1 See, e.g. C.S. Lewis, *Miracles: A Preliminary Study* (London: The Centenary Press, 1947), esp. ch. 14.
- 2 See, e.g., J. Fueck, "The Originality of the Arabian Prophet," in M. Swartz, ed., *Studies on Islam* (Oxford: OUP, 1981); T. Kronholm, "Dependence and Prophetic Originality in the Koran," *Orientalia Suecana* (1982-83), 31-32; M. Waldman, "New Approaches to 'Biblical' Materials in the Qur'ān," *Muslim World* (1985), 75.
- 3 Many Muslim theologians also concede that marvels may be performed by the ungodly, as in the case of the magicians in Pharaoh's day, but the view of miracles as proof of prophethood is maintained by excluding the possibility that such non-prophetic marvels could be accompanied by a claim to prophetic office.
- 4 In particular, the use of the word signs" (i.e. of the inauguration of the Kingdom of Heaven) for supernatural deeds (e.g. Mk. 16:17). The criteria by which John the Baptist was to know that Jesus was the awaited one included the following: "The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised ..." (Mt. 11:5).
- 5 See, e.g. the work of the nineteenth-century missionary to India, Carl Pfander, *The Mizān al-Haqq (Balance of Truth)* (London: The Religious Tract Society, 1910), ch. 5.
- 6 For Qur'anic quotations, I have adapted Yūsuf Ali's translation, attempting to eliminate or minimize elements which reflect a particular interpretation, and archaic language.
- 7 *The Holy Qur'ān: English Translation of the Meanings and Commentary* (Medina: King Fahd Holy Qur'ān Printing Complex, 1410 AH), 155.
- 8 *The Message of the Qur'ān* (Gibraltar: Dār al-Andalus, 1980), 74.
- 9 E.g. Muḥammad 'Abduh, in Y. Khūrī (ed.), *Isā wa Maryam fil-Qur'ān wa'l-Tafsīr* (Amman: Dār al-Shurūq, 1996), 119.
- 10 See, N. Robinson, *Christ in Islam and Christianity* (London: Macmillan, 1991), 143-44.
- 11 One verse of the Qur'ān (54:1) refers to the moon splitting in two, and some commentators took this to refer to a miracle performed by Muḥammad; however, many do not accept this interpretation, which appears to go against the verses just cited which explain Muḥammad's non-performance of miracles.
- 12 The Miracles of Jesus in Early Islamic Polemic," *Journal of Semitic Studies* 39 (1994), 240.
- 13 On the classical commentators' treatment of this subject, see e.g. N. Robinson, "Creating Birds from Clay: A Miracle of Jesus in the Qur'ān and in Classical Muslim Exegesis," *The Muslim World*, 79 (1989); and M. Ayoub, *The Qur'ān and Its Interpreters* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992), 2:141ff.
- 14 For the *tafsīrs* of 'Abduh (*Tafsīr al-Manār*, compiled by Rashīd Ridā), al-Marāghī (*Tafsīr al-Marāghī*), and Quṭb (*Fi Zilāl al-Qur'ān*), I have mostly referred to the compendium of Muslim commentaries on verses of the Qur'ān dealing with Jesus or Mary edited by Y. Khūrī (see n. 9 for details).
- 15 Khūrī, *Isā wa-Maryam*, 132. Al Khaṭīb, on the other hand, puts it the other way around, seeing the miracles of Jesus as springing from the foundational miracle of the virgin birth - *Al-Tafsīr al-Qur'ān li'l-Qur'ān* (Cairo: Dār al-Fikr al-'Arabī), 1:466.
- 16 Khūrī, *Isā wa-Maryam*, 331-32.
- 17 *Ibid.*, 125.
- 18 *Al-Tafsīr al-Wasīṭ li'l-Qur'ān al-Karīm* (Cairo: Matba'at al-Sa'ādah, 1989), 2:147; for a similar view expressed by Quṭb, see Khūrī, *Isā wa-Maryam*, 331.
- 19 Khūrī, *Isā wa-Maryam*, 126.
- 20 *Ibid.*, 126-67.
- 21 *Ibid.*, 127.
- 22 See *ibid.*, 125; anṭawī, *Al-Tafsīr al-Wasīṭ*, 2:148; and Niazi, *Mirror of Trinity*, 27-28, 33.
- 23 Khūrī. *Isā wa-Maryam*, 125-126.

- 24 Ibid., 119 and 125 respectively.
- 25 Ibid., 120.
- 26 Ibid., 125.
- 27 Another element in some of the traditional accounts was that those whom Jesus revived from the dead spoke, and then promptly died again. However, al-Khaṭīb does not mention this, although Ibn ʿAshūr does, *Tafsīr al-Taḥrīr wa'l-Tanuīr* (Tunis: Al-Dār al-Tūnisīyah li'l-Nashr, 1969), 3:252.
- 28 Al-Khaṭīb, *Al-Tafsīr al-Qurʾānī*, a:466-68.
- 29 Here Durrani is reproducing the exact words of Muḥammad Ali in his Qurʾānic commentary which is cited below; Durrani's dependence on this source suggests that he may be an Ahmadi himself.
- 30 Ṭaṇṭawī, for example, states that these two conditions were specified because they were chronic and medicine had no cure for them." *Al-Tafsīr al-Wasīṭ* 2:147.
- 31 See, e.g. Ḥijāzī, *Al-Tafsīr al-Wāḍiḥ* (Cairo: Mabaʿat al-ʿIstiqlāl al-Kubrā, 1977), 1:62; Ibn ʿAshūr, *Tafsīr al-Taḥrīr*, 3:250; ʿAbduh, in Khūrī, *ʿIsā wa-Maryam*, 119.
- 32 *Al-Mizān fī Tafsīr al-Qurʾān* (Beirut: Al-Mabaʿat al-Tijāriyya, n.d.), 3:199; see also ʿAbduh in Khūrī, *ʿIsā wa-Maryam*, 120, and Ibn ʿAshūr, *Tafsīr al-Taḥrīr*, 3:250.
- 33 Ayoub, *The Qurʾān and its Interpreters*, 2:145, 148.
- 34 Khūrī, *ʿIsā wa-Maryam*, 125. This is in contrast with al-abar (d. 310/923), who relates a tradition that Jesus created a bat when told that this was the hardest bird to create - see, Robinson, "Creating Birds of Clay," 5.
- 35 Khūrī, *ʿIsā wa-Maryam*, 319. The last phrase is repeated by al-Marāghī, *Tafsīr al-Marāghī* (Beirut: Dar Iḥyāʾ al-Turāth al-ʿArabī, 1365 AH), pt. 7, 56.
- 36 Khūrī, *ʿIsā wa-Maryam*, 127.
- 37 E.g. aṇṭawī, *Al-Tafsīr al-Wasīṭ*, 2:146; Ibn ʿAshūr, *Tafsīr al-Taḥrīr*, 3:251.
- 38 See respectively, *Al-Mizān*, 3:199 and *Tafsīr al-Taḥrīr*, 3:252.
- 39 See, e.g. ʿAbduh, in Khūrī, *ʿIsā wa-Maryam*, 318, and Ḥijāzī, *Al-Tafsīr al-Wāḍiḥ*, 1:62.
- 40 Khūrī, *ʿIsā wa-Maryam*, 125. This is in contrast with al-abar (d. 310/923), who relates a tradition that Jesus created a bat when told that this was the hardest bird to create - see Robinson, "Creating Birds of Clay," 5.
- 41 *Al-Tafsīr al-Wasīṭ*, 2:148.
- 42 (Elmhurst, New York: Tahrike Tarsil Qurʾān, Inc., 1991).
- 43 In fact, ʿAta ur-Rahim contains only one prolonged account which includes miracles, these being restoring a gazelle to life after roasting and eating part of it, walking on water, and transforming a heap of earth and sand into gold (225). Niazi refers to four people whom Jesus brought to life, two of whom are cited only in Muslim sources (*Mirror of Trinity*, 28); see also Robinson, *Christ in Islam and Christianity*, 146-52, for other such traditions.
- 44 *Al-Tafsīr al-Wasīṭ*, 2:148.
- 45 Khūrī, *ʿIsā wa-Maryam*, 319; *Tafsīr al-Marāghī*, pt. 7, 56.
- 46 *Tafsīr al-Taḥrīr*, 3:251.
- 47 E.g. ʿAbduh, in Khūrī, *ʿIsā wa-Maryam*, 319; al-Marāghī, *Tafsīr al-Marāghī*, pt. 7, 56.
- 48 *Tafsīr al-Taḥrīr*, 3:252.
- 49 *Al-Tafsīr al-Wāḍiḥ*, 1:61.
- 50 This role may be inferred from Qurʾān 5:171, but is only explicitly mentioned in the Gospels: Mt. 1:18; Lk. 1:35.
- 51 Khūrī, *ʿIsā wa-Maryam*, 119.
- 52 *The Holy Qurʾān with English Translation and Commentary* (Rabwah: The Oriental and Religious Publishing Corporation, Ltd., 1969), 140.
- 53 Ibid., 140-41.
- 54 *The Message of the Qurʾān*, 74.
- 55 However, classical theologians and philosophers such as al-Ghazālī and Ibn Rushd did discuss at length the issue of causality and its implications for miracles.

57 See e.g. the influential work by Rahmatullah Kairanvi, *Izbār-ul-Ḥaqq* (London: TaHa Publishers, 1990), pt. 3, 282.

58 See especially, Appendix 1 of *The Message of the Qurʾān*, Symbolism and Allegory in the Qurʾān."

59 The better-known Ahmadi translation and commentary of Muḥammad Ali holds exactly the same position on Jesus's miracles, and is no doubt one of Ghulām Farid's sources.

60 *Al-Taḥsīn al-Qurʾānī*, 1:468.

61 By contrast, Syed Wahiduddin, a Sufi-oriented Indian Muslim, emphasizes the cosmic Christ rather than the human Jesus, and says of him that he radiates *shifā'* [healing] both at the physical and the spiritual level," and he is the embodiment of that tender aspect of the divine which the Qurʾān calls *rahma* [mercy]" cited in K. Zebiri, *Muslims and Christians Face to Face* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1997), 169.