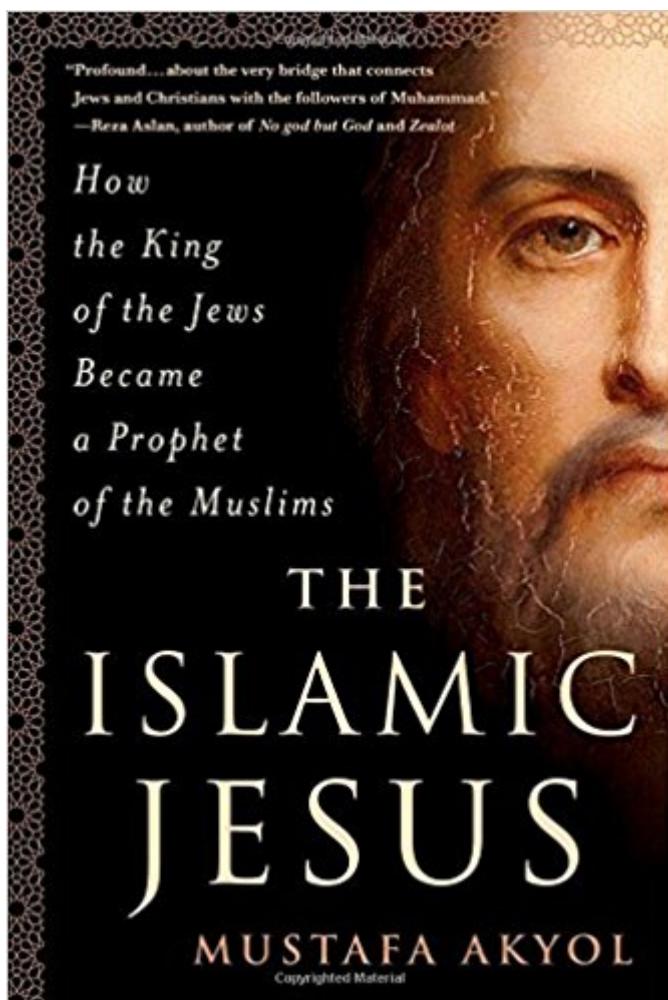


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The Islamic Jesus: How The King Of The Jews Became A Prophet Of The Muslims



Synopsis

When Reza Aslan's bestseller *Zealot* came out in 2013, there was criticism that he hadn't addressed his Muslim faith while writing the origin story of Christianity. In fact, Ross Douthat of The New York Times wrote that "if Aslan had actually written in defense of the Islamic view of Jesus, that would have been something provocative and new." Mustafa Akyol's *The Islamic Jesus* is that book -- and even much more. For *The Islamic Jesus* not only tells the story of Jesus, and his mother Mary, as narrated in the Qur'an. It also explores how this Islamic picture of the Nazarene resonates with pre-existing Christian sources, especially *Apocrypha*. In particular, it unveils the fascinating similarity between Islam and "Jewish Christianity," a strain in the early church that got branded as a heresy. Jewish Christians were observant Jews who honored Jesus as a human -- not divine -- Messiah, and sought salvation by faith and works, not "by faith alone." Akyol shows how their peculiar creed vanished in history after the first few Christian centuries, but only to be reborn in 7th century Arabia by a new prophet named Muhammad. This provokes puzzling questions about the origins of Islam, and the Abrahamic genealogy. The *Islamic Jesus* also offers an "Islamic Christology," and probes into Muslim beliefs on the "Second Coming." Perhaps most provokingly, it even contemplates, "What Jesus can teach Muslims today" -- at a time, Akyol argues, when Muslims are haunted by their own Herods, Pharisees and Zealots.

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Customer Reviews

"The Islamic Jesus is about so much more than Islam or Jesus. It's about the very bridge

that connects Jews and Christians with the followers of Mohammad. Regardless of whether he is a Jewish radical or a Christian Messiah, Jesus is also one of the most beloved prophets in Islam. In this book, Mustafa Akyol expertly distills the Jesus persona and the role it plays in all three religions. This is a profound contribution in proving that Judaism and Christianity are not adversaries to Muslims, but rather intrinsic parts of the entire Islamic belief system." Reza Aslan, author of *No god but God* and *Zealot* "Interfaith dialogue is undoubtedly an admirable way of advancing tolerance and understanding. But removing one's 'military boots' and stepping into the proverbial shoes of another religious conviction in order to ask 'what can Jesus teach Muslims today?' is the preferred way of this book, which I applaud unequivocally. Akyol's proposition to discern the Islamic Jesus through the early apocryphal literature uncannily echoes the Orthodox Church's priority to illuminate the Gospel Jesus through the eastern liturgical tradition." Rev. Dr. John Chryssavgis, Archdeacon of the Ecumenical Patriarchate and author of *Bartholomew: Apostle and Visionary* "This work helps Westerners, especially Christians, to gain more insight into the Islamic understanding of Jesus - upon whom be peace- and also into why, while he is so highly venerated in Islam, he is not divinized as he is in Christianity but remains a prophet." Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Professor of Islamic Studies, The George Washington University "Anyone interested in the deeper relationship between Judaism, Christianity, and Islam will learn much from Mustafa Akyol's thoughtful, clearly written, and well researched analysis of how Jewish beliefs and practices carried over into Christianity, Christian themes were preserved by some Jewish groups, and both, but especially Christianity, were received in Islam. Drawing upon accepted Christian Scriptures as well as lesser known apocryphal writings and related sources, Akyol makes a compelling case for recognizing more common ground among the three faiths than has been heretofore acknowledged. His compelling book is a must read for friends and foes of the Children of Abraham theme." Charles Butterworth, Emeritus Professor, Department of Government & Politics, University of Maryland "In this highly readable and provocative book, Mustafa Akyol establishes the unique role played by Jesus within the Islamic tradition. Most importantly, Akyol turns radical revisionist arguments on their head to make the compelling case that Jesus' life when properly understood confirms the Islamic belief that there is no inherent contradiction between the Biblical and Quranic worldviews. From this vantage point, Jesus does not divide the Abrahamic religions but reconciles them, a message much needed in our divisive times." Asma Afsaruddin, Professor of Islamic Studies, Indiana University "Whether one agrees or disagrees with the historical nuances Akyol presents, one can certainly applaud his significant effort to call people of the respective faith traditions away from the

'us-versus-them' mentality to not only exploring common ground but a respectful exploration of how each of us fit into the larger story of God's interaction throughout human history. His focus on the message of the Christ rather than on the nature of the Christ, is a helpful focus towards interaction which can benefit all. Further, his cultivation of a space of Abrahamic soil the 'Abrahamic archetype' upon which we can come together and benefit in a mutual sharing of faith, points a direction worth pursuing... The Islamic Jesus is a read worth the consideration of those from both the Biblically based faith tradition and the Qur'anic based faith tradition who are serious about their faith and their relations with people of other faiths." ¶Jerald Whitehouse, former director of the Global Center for Adventist Muslim Relations of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists "The Islamic Jesus is a learned and thought-provoking exploration of the figure of Jesus in Islam. Mustafa Akyol develops a measured and distinctive argument of how the Islamic understanding of Jesus is connected to Judaism and Christianity. At the same time he challenges readers to consider how earlier religious controversies, and the figure of Jesus himself, might offer guidance for Islam today." ¶Gabriel Said Reynolds, Professor of Islamic Studies and Theology, University of Notre Dame "Mustafa Akyol is the kind of public intellectual our fractured world needs. He is anchored in a specific tradition but also capable of engaging others with nuance, humility, and good will. In this timely and important book, Akyol provides an insightful account of an Islamic Jesus and a wonderful resource for anyone interested in Abrahamic dialogue." ¶John Barton, PhD, Director of the Center for Faith and Learning, Pepperdine University

MUSTAFA AKYOL is a regular columnist for the Hurriyet Daily News, Al-Monitor.com, and the International New York Times. His book, Islam without Extremes, has been reviewed and quoted by The Wall Street Journal, Financial Times, Washington Post, NPR, The Guardian, National Review, and Washington Times. Akyol has appeared on Fareed Zakaria's GPS on CNN, Hardtalk on BBC, and TED.com. Islam without Extremes was long-listed for the 2012 Lionel Gelber Prize literary prize.

Akyol closes his book with these words. "As Muslims, who are latecomers to this scene, we have disagreements with both Jews and Christians. But we have major agreements as well. With Jews, we agree a lot on God. With Christians, we agree that Jesus was born of a virgin, that he was the Messiah, and that he is the Word of God. Surely, we do not worship Jesus, like Christians do. Yet still, we can follow him. In fact, given our grim malaise and his shining wisdom, we need to follow

him." (215) As two examples of how contemporary Muslims can follow Jesus without worshiping him, Akyol says that Jesus' teaching on Kingdom - "The Caliphate is within you" - could help contemporary Muslims embrace a vision of God's reign that is more interior, less tied to nationalism and militarism. The other powerful example of contextualizing Jesus' teaching is, in Akyol's words, "The Shariah is made for man." Jesus could help religious people, as he originally did, embrace a more holistic, less literal approach to law that would better promote human flourishing. Akyol gets to this conclusion by way of two points he develops, with clear and accessible prose, supported by considerable scholarship, both Christian and Muslim. One is that Islam is a closer cousin to Christianity than both traditions have generally acknowledged. In fact, Akyol closely reviews the theory and evidence that Islam - either through direct influence or through divine revelation - could be a further development of a Jewish form of Christianity, in which Jesus is honored as a messianic teacher and prophet, without being worshiped as part of the triune godhead. Muslims, after all, honor Jesus as a word of God, a prophet, a miracle-performer, a son of the virgin Mary, and one who will come again to restore all things. The second and related point is that Jesus can continue to serve as a guide and teacher and prophet, not just to the world at large, but specifically to the Muslim world. The West generally, and Christendom in particular have ironically made it much more difficult for Muslims to do this. A defining question for Muslims (and indeed, for much of the world) over the past two centuries has been how to relate to an aggressively powerful, colonial West. Understandably, defensiveness and hostility have resulted, rather than dialogue and reflection. Thankfully, Muslims need not consider Jesus a product of the West. A Palestinian Jew, born to a people group oppressed by a Western empire themselves, Jesus' teaching and legacy and prophetic voice are not the property of the Western world or even of Christendom. Muslims can embrace Jesus as their guide and teacher and prophet as well. Much more could be said. As a non-Muslim who is deeply committed to the Way of Jesus, I find Akyol's treasure trove of scholarship and perspective fascinating and hopeful. I'll close, though, with one more quotation, this one from a Jesus-oriented, 20th century Egyptian Muslim, Khalid Muhammad Khalid. "He is the love which knows no hatred, he is the peace that knows no disquiet, and he is the salvation that does not perish. And when all this is realized on earth, then at the same time, the return of Christ is realized. This is the Christ who will return, and whose return the Messenger prophesied: peace, love, truth, the good and beauty. With the truthful Messenger, we declare: 'Christ, not Barabbas, the true not the false, love not hatred, peace not war, life not destruction.'" (215) I follow and worship Jesus, but anyone who can view Jesus on such terms, regardless of the details of their theology, I will be glad to call friend and brother.

I gave this book four stars for its readability and it's generous, irenic spirit. I appreciate author Mustafa Akyol's desire to spark friendly dialogue between Islam, Christianity and Judaism, and especially appreciate his very irenic tone. That being said it seems to me that he wants to have his cake and eat it too. Akyol is a critical author, but only to a point. He basically wants all three faiths to be able to claim Jesus as "their" prophet but to fit Jesus into a framework Muslims and Jews can accept has to explain away the NT teaching and the historic Christian belief about Jesus being the Word made flesh, crucified and bodily resurrected, which will turn off many, if not most, Christians. Akyol is aware that not all Christians will be comfortable with the Jesus he posits. Basically, Akyol argues that the true historic Jesus was a Jewish prophet/reformer who at the hands of the early church gradually evolved into the preexistent, divine Son of God, not a new theory, but one that is increasingly losing steam in academia (there are dozens of great books that critically examine this theory and explain why it doesn't hold water). If Jesus was just a human prophet and/or Jewish reformer he can't be at the same time the divine Son of God, the Word made flesh. So the Jesus Akyol posits is a Jewish, yet non-divine Jesus, a Jesus that most Jews and Muslims can get behind, but not most Christians. Akyol discusses the ways in which Muhammed and early Islam were influenced by non-canonical (to be generous) views of Jesus by certain non-orthodox (again to be generous) sects in the 5th and 6th centuries AD. Some of these sects (like the Ebionites) basically regarded Jesus as a Jewish prophet but certainly not God incarnate. Other, Gnostic sects, argued that Jesus was a spirit-being whose physical incarnation was merely an illusion. This view harmonizes with scholars of Islamic origins such as Ibn Warraq, who argue that Muslim christology was influenced by certain Christian groups, some of them Gnostic, judged to be heretical, which would explain why Muslims reject the idea of the Trinity and the idea that God could incarnate as a human, as well as their rejection of the idea that Jesus was crucified--certain Gnostic Christian sects argued that Jesus, as a spirit-being, wasn't really executed by crucifixion, that Jesus switched places with Simon of Cyrene or someone else who was crucified in his place. Christoph Luxenburg, Ibn Warraq and other modern scholars also argue that the Quran was heavily influenced by 5th and 6th century Syrian Christian lectionaries. Akyol seems fine with the notion that the Quran is heavily dependent on the OT and NT, yet is still a divinely-inspired faith; as a practicing moderate Muslim he doesn't at all engage the arguments of critical scholars like Warraq who seriously question the traditional story of Islam's origins, including the historical existence of Muhammed. This is another deficit of the book, though it's admittedly peripheral to his main argument. Akyol notes in numerous places that modern NT scholars are divided about how early the Church began to regard Jesus as

divine but that many are increasingly seeing an early high christology; for example Akyol informs readers that noted scholars Richard Bauckham, Martin Hengel and Larry Hurtado (the so-called Early High Christology Club, or EHCC) have recently made very convincing arguments for a very early and very high christology of Jesus and yet Akyol doesn't engage with this scholarship at all. It seems to me that he's probably read these and similar authors like NT Wright (who he also references in the book), but simply brushes them aside, refusing to critically engage with their arguments because if he did that he might have to take seriously the idea put forward by the EHCC scholars that the early church did in fact regard Jesus as divine from the beginning, which wouldn't be palatable with his Muslim brethren and Jewish friends. In my opinion this is the biggest deficit of the book. The *only* way Akyol can come away with the Jesus he wants is to set aside a large body of the latest critical NT scholarship. So in my humble opinion this book is good in its attempt to dialogue about Jesus with the three great Abrahamic faiths yet ultimately fails because because as I said, the author wants to have his cake and eat it too, he wants to make everyone happy and give each faith a Jesus they can respect, but to do that, has to strip Jesus of the very early, very high christology that orthodox Christians ascribe to Jesus. So in the end, not everyone will be happy. So traditional, orthodox Christians will not find Akyol's Jesus convincing or satisfactory, though liberal Christians, Muslims and Jews probably will. Again, I appreciate the author's openness and willingness to initiate a dialogue about Jesus among the three great faiths which honor him. We need more of this type of interfaith dialogue, but not at the expense of downplaying/reinterpreting the historic beliefs of the largest segment of one of those three faiths.

I must admit that my knowledge of Islam is spotty at best. Assuming the author has the scholarly credentials to back up the assertions made in this work, his observations are very enlightening. I was aware that Jesus was regarded as a great prophet in the Koran, but not that there was any belief in a Second Coming or that there might be modern Islamic scholars still contemplating the place of Jesus in their religion. However, there is no indication that this scholarship has much application among the everyday adherents of Islam any more than most Christians think there is anything for them to learn from Islam. So I think this is a worthwhile work for anyone interested in comparative religion. Except in this group, which is by definition more open-minded than the average, I doubt it will start any thoughtful processes.

The narrative is good and very easy to understand. The comparison of the three faiths very well done and easy to comprehend. Very interesting points of view that leave you with hope for a near by

future where we can understand each other and work our differences as Jesus taught. He is the common link that will make it possible. The truth will come from different cultures working together not by isolating from the rest of the world. That is the new paradigm of evangelization in this century.

Very objective explanation of origin and history of Islam. Very fair to Christians and Jews. All in all, well written.

A great book that explains how Muslims view Jesus.

A work of tremendous scholarship but also great religious sensitivity. Akyol not only gets the historical Jesus right, he also identifies Muslim scholars who got him right and whose work is valuable today.

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