



PhD thesis

The portrayal of Jesus in Islam amongst contemporary Muslims writing to the American public: in what ways do their writings represent continuity and change in relation to formative-classical Muslim understandings?

Phillips, J.

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**The Portrayal of Jesus in Islam
Amongst Contemporary Muslims Writing to the American Public:
In What Ways do Their Writings Represent Continuity and Change
in Relation to Formative-Classical Muslim Understandings?**

James Allan Phillips
Oxford Centre for Mission Studies, PhD

Abstract

Tarif Khalidi, a contemporary Muslim scholar, has observed that the identity of the Jesus of Islam has been changing since the canonical writings of the Qur'an and Hadith. He has moved from the ascetic saint of formative-classical Islam to lord of nature, miracle worker, healer, and social and ethical model of modern Islam. He says that Jesus has become much more than an argument for the truth of Islam, "he is a living and vital moral voice, demanding to be heard."¹

Inspired by Khalidi's observation, I analyze the writings of six contemporary Muslim scholars writing to the American public to determine the ways in which their understandings of the Jesus of Islam have evolved from formative-classical Muslim understandings. I identify nine themes demonstrating their movements in understandings of the Jesus of Islam. These themes are organized in five chapters: The Uniqueness of 'Īsā, The Nature of 'Īsā as the Word of Allah, Prophet of Hope - Future and Present, Zealot and Martyr, and Object of Personal Appreciation.

I affirm Khalidi's observation that the Jesus of Islam is evolving, but my objective is to go beyond this observation. It is to identify the ways in which the Jesus of Islam may be evolving within a contemporary American context and determine the direction and degree of change from formative-classical understandings. I conclude that, with one exception, the primary source authors' understandings of the Jesus of Islam are evolving from formative-classical understandings towards the Jesus of the Gospels understandings to the point of tension or conflict with the earlier understandings. The conclusion of this thesis provides a summary of my findings and raises new questions for future research. The Literature Review identifies a gap in the current body of knowledge regarding the Jesus of Islam, arguing that there is no comprehensive account of Muslim observations on Christ that also takes present day views into account. This research will address this gap.

¹ Tarif Khalidi ed., *The Muslim Jesus: Sayings and Stories in Islamic Literature*, Convergences (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 1,45. In his evolution as lord of nature, miracle worker, and healer, Khalidi's collection of stories about Jesus demonstrates that he always did things by God's leave, but his authority appeared to evolve such that he did not need to request God's permission.

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in Relation to Formative-Classical Muslim Understandings?

by

James A. Phillips

BSEE (United States Naval Academy, Annapolis, MD, USA)

MALA (St. John's College, Annapolis, MD, USA)

PGDip (University of Oxford, Oxford, UK)

Main Supervisor: Dr. Martin Whittingham

Second Supervisor: Dr. Amir Hussain

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

In Middlesex University

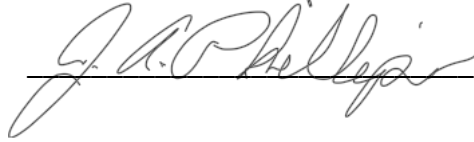
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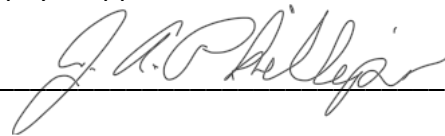
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STATEMENT ONE

This thesis is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated. Where correction services have been used, the extent and nature of the correction is clearly marked in a footnote. Other sources are acknowledged by midnotes or footnotes giving explicit references. A bibliography is appended.

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Date

June 30, 2024

STATEMENT TWO

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Conventions

I use the academic designations BCE (Before the Common Era) in place of BC (Before Christ) and CE (Common Era) instead of AD (Anno Domini, Year of the Lord). The Muslim abbreviation AH stands for Anno Hijri, that is after the Hijrah. Where necessary, I give the combined dates as AH/CE.

Muslims and Christians believe in one Supreme Deity. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to address differences in understandings of the Supreme Deity by these groups. I will use the terms “Allah” and “God” interchangeably throughout this text. The initial letters of pronouns and other terms referring to “Allah” and “God” are in upper case.

Regarding transliteration, some words with accepted English spellings will not be transliterated. When transliteration is used, I will follow the system of the *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*. Regarding capitalization of words like “hadīth”, “scripture”, and “gospel”, if I am referring to these in a general sense, it will be lowercase, but when referring to a particular corpus, I will capitalize the term. I also utilize American grammar and spelling. For example, American grammar prefers that a capital letter follow the colon before a complete sentence. All quotations retain the grammar, spelling, and transliterations of the author.

The term “formative-classical understandings” includes understandings derived from Qur’an, Hadīth, Sufi and other writings collected between 610 CE and 1500 CE.

Jonathan Berkey says, the early ‘Abbāsid period (786 -809 CE) can be thought of as a “classical one ... in which many of the norms and artifacts which defined ‘Islam’ in later centuries took recognizable shape,” but much of what became characteristic of Islam took shape in 1000 – 1500 CE.² The period between 610 CE, when Muhammad is traditionally understood to have first begun receiving revelations, and 1500 CE, the span identified by Berkey, is the timeframe I will refer to as the formative-classical period of Islam. Chapter 1.1 collects a formative-classical understanding of the Jesus of Islam that will be used as a reference to determine movements in understandings by the primary source authors.

The terms “Jesus of Islam,” “Jesus in Islam,” “‘Īsā,” and “Muslim Jesus” refer to understandings of Jesus derived from Muslim writings and sacred texts and will be used interchangeably. The term “Jesus of the Gospels” and “Christianity’s Jesus” denote understandings of Jesus derived from the four Gospels of the Christian New Testament and Christian tradition regarding interpretation of these texts. In this text, the term “historical Jesus” refers to understandings that position Jesus as a historical character in the rationalist/secular perspective without divinity or supernatural abilities; this framework denies the virgin birth, miracles, resurrection, and divinity of Christ which would generally be accepted by “Jesus of the Gospels” and “Christianity’s Jesus” understandings.

² Jonathan Porter Berkey, *The Formation of Islam: Religion and Society in the Near East, 600-1800*, Themes in Islamic History, vol. 2. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 114, 179.

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Introduction

Before engaging the reader with how the Jesus of Islam might be evolving in a contemporary American context, an introduction to the “why,” “what,” and “how” of the research would be helpful. The “why” is addressed in this first section, “Background to the Research and Research Questions.” Why did this topic capture my attention and become the object of this research? The “what” relates to the existing body of knowledge: What gap does this research fill? This is addressed in the “Literature Review.” Authors past and present are surveyed for their contribution to Jesus of Islam understandings. It is here that this research’s contribution to the existing body of knowledge on the Jesus of Islam, the “what,” is identified. “How” to measure variations from formative-classical understandings, to quantify qualitative research, is proposed in “Methods/Research Approach.”

After addressing the “why,” “what,” and “how” of this research, this thesis is arranged chronologically to engage the question. I use “American context” or “American culture” to designate the milieu for my primary source authors’ writings and I intend these terms to encompass the American public as a target audience, though the authors’ intended audience may be more comprehensive.

Chapter 1.1 proposes a formative-classical understanding of the Jesus of Islam that can be used to demonstrate movements when reading contemporary texts. Chapter 1.2 introduces Khalidi’s *The Muslim Jesus* in which he offers over 300 sayings found in

post-canonical Islamic literature collected between the 8th and 18th centuries CE. A summary of variations observed in these sayings will be offered before introducing the primary source authors in Chapters 2 through 4, “Contemporary Muslims Writing to the American Public about the Jesus of Islam.” In Chapters 5-9, themes are identified, discussed, and quantified in preparation for the conclusion offered in Chapter 10. I will identify significant variations from formative-classical understandings, and from each other, among the authors in their understandings of the Jesus of Islam. I intend to articulate these movements and suggest their impact upon American Muslim understandings of the Jesus of Islam through the chapters that follow.

To determine the setting from which to select the primary sources, an understanding of Islamic demographics in America is helpful. Muslims in America today consist of two main groups, indigenous and immigrant Muslims. Indigenous Muslims are primarily Black Muslims (the term I will use to distinguish between the historical Nation of Islam and its offshoots, as opposed to contemporary African American Muslims who are overwhelmingly Sunni) who were the majority of Muslims in America until 1965 when U.S. immigration laws were relaxed to allow immigration from Middle Eastern countries. Prior to 1965, most Black Muslims practiced a syncretism of Black Religion and Islam as introduced by black slaves from Africa.³ This form of Islam, Black Muslim Islam, was

³ Sherman A. Jackson, *Islam and the Blackamerican: Looking Toward the Third Resurrection* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 28,31,69. Jackson says, “Black Religion has no theology and no orthodoxy; In a real sense, Black Religion might be profitably thought of as the ‘deism’ or ‘natural religion’ of Blackamericans, a spontaneous folk orientation at once grounded in the belief in a supernatural power outside of human history yet uniquely focused on that power’s manifesting itself in the form of interventions into the crucible

regarded by leaders among its movement as non-orthodox. For example, Malcolm X, after his conversion to Sunni Islam, considered Sunni Islam to be orthodox and encouraged members of the Nation of Islam (NOI) to “embrace what he defined as Sunni and orthodox Islam;”⁴ Elijah Muhammad, who led the NOI from 1934 until his death in 1975, referred to Sunni Islam as “orthodox” and Black Muslim Islam as “a new Islam;”⁵ and Muhammad’s sons, Wallace and Akbar, after returning from a trip to the Middle East, began to question their father’s teachings in light of the “orthodoxy” they had witnessed in “Sunni Egypt.”⁶ When Wallace took over the NOI, he made changes including renaming himself Warith Deen. Most of the NOI joined him in the move to Sunni Islam.

Today, while African American Islam accounts for less than 40% of all Muslims in America through the influx of immigrant Muslims, the remnants of Black Muslim Islam are negligible.⁷ After surveying pre-1965 Black Muslim theology, I decided not to include a representative author from this segment of Islam because of its declining community

of American race relations.” Also see Amir Hussain, *Muslims and the Making of America*, (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2016), chap. 1. Hussain says, “Some of the ideology of the Nation of Islam was positive, telling African Americans to love themselves, and take control of their own lives and economic affairs. Other parts of the ideology were quite negative, with White people literally being the devil, devilish creations of an evil scientist exiled by the wise Black leaders of original humanity.”

⁴ Adil Ahmed, “Islam and Black America: The Religious Life of Malcolm X.” *Journal of African American Studies* 24, no. 3 (2020), 472.

⁵ Elijah Muhammad, *Message to the Blackman in America*, (Philadelphia: Hakim’s Publications, 1965), 49-50.

⁶ Herbert Berg, “African American Islam,” 2015, 7.

⁷ Jackson, *Islam and the Blackamerican: Looking toward the Third Resurrection*, 22.

and the influence of Druze and Ahmadiyya doctrines upon its Christology.⁸ Both of these sects affirm the death of Jesus. Druze doctrine teaches the death of Jesus on the cross. The Ahmadiyya view is that Jesus was saved from an accursed death on the cross and escaped to Tibet and finally to India where he died and was buried in Kashmir.⁹ While it is possible for understandings of a deceased person to evolve, the finality of Jesus' life and mission along with his place in Black Muslim doctrine makes evolution of his persona unlikely. Kathleen O'Connor best describes this when, regarding Black Muslim Islam, she says, "The historical Jesus ... will never return. He is a dead prophet, not a living God. But the Messiahhood of Jesus and his apocalyptic identifier, the 'Lamb,' from the Book of Revelation, can and does return in the persons of divine messengers, whether it is Elijah Muhammad to the Nation of Islam or Isa Muhammad to the Ansarullah [Ahmadiyya] Community."¹⁰ In Black Muslim theology, Jesus "is the biblical prototype for the modern black militant and martyr."¹¹ He does not evolve but remains a static model and a prototype for divine inspiration that could appear in a Black Muslim leader. Given Black Muslim theology's static understandings of Jesus, its unorthodoxy, and its steady decline in relation to Sunni Islam in America, the search for relevant literature was limited to authors within the dominant Sunni and Shi'a traditions.

⁸ Kathleen Malone O'Connor, "The Islamic Jesus: Messiahhood and Human Divinity in African American Muslim Exegesis." *Oxford Journals* 66, no. 3 (Autumn 1998): 493–532.

⁹ *Ibid*, 500.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 523-524.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 518.

This work is a study by a non-Muslim. I am a Christian and this will be evident to the reader throughout this text. I am aware that my Christian understandings shape the way that I read Islamic Scripture and the writings of the Muslim authors I have selected for this research. However, this awareness should be helpful in maintaining objectivity towards the ideas presented by my Muslim sources and not distort the findings of this thesis.¹²

¹² This paragraph draws on an introduction by David Marshall in *God, Muhammad and the Unbelievers: A Qur'anic Study* (Richmond: Curzon, 1999), 6.

Background to the Research and Research Questions

Khalidi has observed that the identity of the Jesus of Islam has been changing since the canonical writings of the Qur'an and Hadīth.¹³ In *The Muslim Jesus* he offers over 300 sayings found in post-canonical Islamic literature collected between the 8th and 18th centuries CE in support of his observation. Khalidi believes that the Jesus of Islam (Īsā) has evolved from the ascetic saint of formative-classical Islam to “the lord of nature, the miracle worker, the healer, the social and ethical model of modern Islam.” He says that Jesus has become much more than an argument for the truth of Islam, he is “a living and vital moral voice demanding to be heard.”¹⁴

It is not validation of Khalidi's observation that is the focus of this thesis; the Literature Review will mention several authors who confirm his assertion. Instead, I will explore whether what he observed is continuing to occur, especially among Muslim authors writing to the American public, and what form any changes are taking.

Reasons for finding changes in understandings of the Jesus of Islam in an American context are suggested by Kambiz GhaneaBassiri who says, “State discourses on Islam and Muslims in America, from the constitutional era through the Cold War era to the present, have all had very little to do with Muslims' beliefs and practices and everything to do with

¹³ Tarif Khalidi ed., *The Muslim Jesus: Sayings and Stories in Islamic Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 1.

¹⁴ Khalidi, *The Muslim Jesus*, 45.

the political mechanisms of exclusion and inclusion in the United States' democracy."¹⁵ He argues that in order for Muslims to find their proper place in American society as equal citizens they have to focus on allaying fears about Muslim participation in their society.¹⁶ GhaneaBassiri is suggesting that Muslims need to better articulate and defend their "beliefs and practices" to become more accepted in American society because this will allay the fears other Americans may have about their participation. I consider the person of Jesus as a focus for articulating Muslims' beliefs and practices in America is a strong prospect; given a shared respect for him by Muslims and much of American cultures. Stephen Prothero supports this proposition by saying, "It is highly unlikely that Americans will ever come to any consensus about who Jesus really is, but they have agreed for some time that Jesus really matters. In a country divided by race, ethnicity, gender, class, and religion, Jesus functions as common cultural coin."¹⁷ "Common cultural coin" provides the opportunity for dialogue in American culture around the person of Jesus. Prothero asserts, "Everyone [in America] is free to understand Jesus in his or her own way," and he argues that this results in a syncretism of beliefs across the various belief systems causing "Buddhist, Hindus, and Muslims, to adopt Christian norms and

¹⁵ Kambiz GhaneaBassiri, "Religion-State Relations and the Politics of Religious Freedom in Muslim America," in *Muslims and US Politics Today*, 9–26 (Boston, Massachusetts: Washington, D.C: Ilex Foundation; Center for Hellenic Studies, Trustees for Harvard University, 2019), 22.

¹⁶ Ibid, 23.

¹⁷ Stephen R. Prothero, *American Jesus: How the Son of God Became a National Icon*. 1st edition (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2003), 300.

organizational forms.”¹⁸ This suggests that movements in understandings of the person of Jesus in Islam may be expected as Muslim authors attempt to bridge Islamic understandings with understandings in an American context.

After reading the primary source materials, some preliminary comments can be made. There exists an exchange of ideas among contemporary Muslim authors writing to the American public on the Jesus of Islam; each understands their own contribution, but none captures the totality of the exchange, or the implications of the information shared. In the following chapters, I will demonstrate that Reza Aslan presents a Jesus who is opposed to social evil.¹⁹ Zeki Saritoprak is exuberant in his expectation of the imminent return of ‘Īsā and the peace he will bring to the world.²⁰ Mustafa Akyol says the Islamic Jesus gives us a prophet for this time, for Muslims, Jews and Christians living today, to bring about a Caliphate of the heart in each and every person.²¹ Yasin al-Jibouri is concerned about a drift in understandings of the Islamic Jesus and reminds us of formative-classical understandings and why they cannot be altered.²² Ali Ataie says, “‘Īsā is one of a kind ... there is no one in existence like him ... he is the perfect man,” and

¹⁸ Ibid, 6.

¹⁹ Reza Aslan, *Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth*, Trade Paperback Edition (New York: Random House, 2014), 128.

²⁰ Zeki Saritoprak, *Islam’s Jesus* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2014), 119.

²¹ Mustafa Akyol, *The Islamic Jesus: How the King of the Jews Became a Prophet of the Muslims*, First Edition (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2017), 206-210.

²² Yasin al-Jibouri, *Mary and Jesus in Islam* (Roanoke: Yasin, 2014), 181.

believes the New Testament Gospels to be the uncorrupted *Injil* of the Jesus of Islam.²³

And finally, Fatih Harpci, while holding fast to formative-classical understandings of ʿĪsā, is focused on the allegorical and spiritual significance of the return of Jesus (*nuzūl* ʿĪsā).

Aslan appears to have been a catalyst for this exchange of understandings as several primary sources reference his book and correct or offer different interpretations of his ideas. All but one of the authors published their work after Aslan's *Zealot*, which was published in 2013. One primary source, Harpci, states that, "The purpose of this study is to take Christians and Muslims from mutual ignorance to sincere dialogue."²⁴ Harpci's thesis was submitted the same year Aslan's *Zealot* was published and was focused on articulating and defending a formative-classical understanding of the Jesus of Islam. Harpci says there is "mutual ignorance" regarding the Jesus of Islam; a statement which he directs at both Muslim and non-Muslim. Aslan's understanding of the Jesus of Islam is a major departure from formative-classical understandings which is why he may have been the impetus for the books and theses that followed *Zealot*.²⁵ Aslan reconstructs a Jesus that represents a new and most interesting persona by a contemporary American Muslim scholar. In an interview, Aslan says, "I think if the Islamic

²³ Ali Ataie, *Authenticating the Johannine Injil: Sunnite 'Polemirenic' Interpretive Methodological Approaches to the Gospel of John*, 234.

²⁴ Fatih Harpci, *Muhammad Speaking of the Messiah: Jesus in the Hadith Tradition*, (Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Temple University, 2013), 196-198. Both Harpci and Ataie have prominent public voices in America as they both teach in American universities and are lecturers in both secular and religious venues.

²⁵ Reza Aslan, "The life of Jesus: No angel," *The Economist*, July 27, 2013.

reformation is going to come to fruition in our lifetime, then it is going to be led by Muslim Americans.”²⁶ What does he mean by “Islamic reformation” and do the other primary sources agree with him? Aslan’s “Islamic reformation” will be discussed later.

As a result of the movements in understandings of the Jesus of Islam this research will identify, several sub-questions will be raised: First, what implications do these movements have on the cultural or theological factors giving them impetus?; second, are there any discernible factors that can be identified to explain the changes in understandings by the primary sources from formative-classical understandings?; third, is ʿĪsā in America creating tension in the Islamic narrative which presents Muhammad as the greater prophet?; and last, is ʿĪsā in America becoming more like the Gospel Jesus as traditionally understood and closing the gap between Muslim and Christian understandings, or is he becoming more estranged than ever from the Jesus of the Gospels? These and other questions will be considered in the conclusion, Chapter 10.

This thesis will offer a broad framework of formative-classical understanding and identify variations from that understanding by contemporary American Muslim authors. These changes will be discussed thematically in Chapters 5-9.

²⁶ Zahir Janmohamed, “Reza Aslan: An Interview,” *The Islamic Monthly*, January 1, 2006, 119. Also see M. A. Muqtedar Khan, *American Muslims: Bridging Faith and Freedom*, 1st edition. (Beltsville: Amana Publications, 2002), 18. Khan agrees with Aslan saying, ““Many contemporary Islamic scholars believe that if anything good in the name of Islam is going to happen, then it is the Muslims in the West, liberated from poverty and political repression, who will precipitate it.”

Literature Review

In 2001, Khalidi published *The Muslim Jesus* and observed that the Jesus of Islam has evolved from the ascetic saint of formative-classical Islam to “the lord of nature, the miracle worker, the healer, the social and ethical model of modern Islam.” Inspired by Khalidi’s observation, I began a search for works written about this topic. The account that follows is the literature review that led to the research question. “Contemporary” will be defined as works published in the past ten years.

I selected a ten-year period for two reasons. First, the review that follows demonstrates that extending the timeframe by thirty years would not capture additional relevant works. Second, the past ten-year period has seen a significant increase in the number of young Americans leaving their faith, including American Muslims.²⁷ Therefore, it is reasonable to expect that works published by American Muslim authors during this time would be aimed at attracting and retaining young American Muslims and their understandings of the Jesus of Islam could represent potential movements from formative-classical understandings as they attempt to distinguish him in an American context. I will demonstrate that some of the primary sources wrote their texts for this purpose and their understandings demonstrate variances from formative-classical understandings.

²⁷ Besheer Mohamed and Elizabeth Podrebarac Sciupac. “The Share of Americans Who Leave Islam Is Offset by Those Who Become Muslim.” *Pew Research Center* (blog). Accessed February 5, 2024.

This literature review will examine two categories of authors. First, Muslim authors writing on the Jesus of Islam who were not selected as primary sources will be introduced with explanations for their exclusion. Second, non-Muslim authors who have written about the Jesus of Islam will be surveyed to determine the contribution of the present thesis.

To identify Muslim authors who could be primary sources, three conditions must be met: First, published within the ten-year contemporary constraint; second, written in an American context; and third, possessing relevant content. There are several Muslim authors who have written on the Jesus of Islam and were not included in this research. Of this group, six have written within the past ten years.

First, Bilal Muhammad co-authored *The Good Shepherd: Jesus Christ in Islam* in 2021. After offering understandings of the Jesus of Islam using Islamic Scripture between the 8th and 10th century CE without modification or expansion, the author permits several other sources, mostly non-Muslim, to comment on their understandings of Jesus in their faith traditions. It is Muhammad's intent "to help others understand the historical Jesus and breadth of the Judaeo-Christian tradition."²⁸ This work is contemporary and addressed to an American context, but the content is not relevant since the understandings of the Jesus of Islam presented are from non-contemporary sources without modification or expansion by the author.

²⁸ Bilal Muhammad and David Coolidge, *The Good Shepherd: Jesus Christ in Islam*, (Independently Published, 2021), 6.

Second, Mohammad Abdullah wrote *Islam: Jesus, Mehdi, Qadiyanis and Doomsday* primarily to discredit the Qadiani-Ahmadis and Black Muslim claims about Jesus and offer signs of the coming Doomsday (*Qiyāmah*) so that Muslims would recognize the Mahdī and Messiah when they come.²⁹ While writing in an American context, Abdullah focuses on the signs of Jesus of Islam's return but does not offer new insights on his person or attributes.

Third, Mona Siddiqui wrote *Christians, Muslims, and Jesus* which she says is, "to offer the reader an adequate sense of what the primary sources are saying about Jesus."³⁰ Siddiqui's sources include texts from the 8th century CE until present [2012] and she says, "it is essential that it is their words that are read rather than my own interpretation or paraphrase."³¹ *Christians, Muslims, and Jesus* is about arguments Muslims and Christians offer on the person of Jesus and many other themes based on non-contemporary sources. Siddiqui is not writing in an American context and does not offer "interpretation or paraphrase" with potential for movement from formative-classical understandings.³²

²⁹ Mohammad Abdullah, *Islam, Jesus, Mehdi, Qadiyanis and Doomsday*, 2014th ed., (New Delhi: Adam Publishers & Distributors, 2014), 13-14. "Qadiani-Ahmadis" is a derogatory term used to refer to the contemporary messianic movement founded in 1989 by Mirza Ghulam Ahmad (1839–1908), who was born in the small village of Qadian in Punjab, India.

³⁰ Mona Siddiqui, *Christians, Muslims, and Jesus* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 3.

³¹ *Ibid*, 4.

³² Siddiqui offers a historical overview of what her sources have said about Jesus in both conciliatory and polemical terms. *Christians, Muslims, and Jesus* is a repetition of historical positions on Jesus by both Muslims and Christians. Since Siddiqui does not offer her own understandings of Jesus, it is assumed that she aligns with historical Muslim positions and offers no new understandings to consider.

Fourth, Nancy Roberts wrote two essays in 2013 and 2016 addressing topics relevant to the Jesus of Islam.³³ In her essays, Roberts discusses the crucifixion death of Jesus, which she affirms, the redemptive value of Jesus' death, and Mary's virginity before the birth of Jesus, which she doubts. Unlike the selected primary sources, who argue from Muslim Scripture towards their understandings, Roberts, a convert from Christianity to Islam who wants to maintain the Christian understandings she values, argues from those understandings towards Muslim Scripture, attempting to syncretize them. She says, "though 'Muslim,' I find that I do feel, to borrow [Frithjof] Schuon's phrase, 'the need to claim ... means of grace which are proper to Christianity.' Such a statement may open me to accusations of syncretism, heresy, or both."³⁴ Just prior to this quote, Roberts quotes Schuon to say that Islam has its own path to grace from God and does not need Christianity's path to do this. Roberts disagrees with Schuon. In defense of her belief that Mary was not a virgin before the birth of Christ, Roberts says, "Only by looking full-faced at what we – both Christians and Muslims – tend to view as infallible sources of divine truth can we free ourselves ultimately from the tyranny of absolutism that lies at the root of our history of painful and bloody conflict."³⁵ Viewing Scripture as fallible, whether Muslim or Christian Scripture, can result in exegeses that construct whatever

³³ Nancy Roberts, "A Muslim Reflects on Christ Crucified: Stumbling-Block or Blessing?" *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 24, no. 3 (2013), 313–31; Nancy Roberts, "Reflections on the Virgin Birth of Jesus." *Syndicate Theology*, no. 3.5 (2016), 148–51.

³⁴ Roberts, "A Muslim Reflects on Christ Crucified: Stumbling-Block or Blessing?", 318.

³⁵ Roberts, "Reflections on the Virgin Birth of Jesus.", 151.

truth the author desires. Roberts is not included as a primary source because her ideas are based on the assumed fallibility of Muslim Scripture, making her conclusions less acceptable and relevant to Muslims.

Fifth, Seyyed Ḥossein Naṣr published *The Study Quran* in 2015.³⁶ This work and Joseph Lombard's essay "The Quranic View of Sacred History and Other Religions" provide commentary on Qur'anic verses.³⁷ Both Naṣr and Lombard are consistent with formative-classical understandings of the Jesus of Islam as articulated in Chapter 1.1 of this thesis. Naṣr says in his introduction, "it [this book] would be grounded in the classic Islamic tradition."³⁸ Given the intent of this work to present understandings consistent with "classic Islamic tradition," it fails one of the three criteria for primary source selection, possessing relevant content, because it does not offer contemporary understandings of the Jesus of Islam; it offers "classical" understandings in a contemporary publication.

Lastly, Younus Mirza co-authored *The Bible and the Quran: Biblical Figures in the Islamic Tradition* with John Kaltner in 2018.³⁹ Given that Mirza co-authored this book

³⁶ Seyyed Ḥossein Naṣr, Caner K. Dagli, Maria Massi Dakake, Joseph E. B. Lombard, and Mohammed Rustom, eds., *The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary*, First edition (New York: HarperOne, 2015).

³⁷ Joseph Lombard, "The Quranic View of Sacred History and Other Religions." In *The Study Quran*, First Edition (New York: HarperOne, 2015), 1765–84.

³⁸ Naṣr, *The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary*, XL.

³⁹ John Kaltner and Younus Mirza, *The Bible and the Quran: Biblical Figures in the Islamic Tradition* (New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2018.)

with Kaltner, it is not possible to differentiate Mirza's and Kaltner's understandings. In Carole Hillenbrand's review of Mirza's book, she says, "It would be inappropriate and indeed unfair to criticise the book for what it does not pretend to offer, namely an in-depth assessment in English of these 48 figures."⁴⁰ Mirza's book offers seven pages about the Qur'anic Jesus. Because of the brevity of his work, his close adherence to formative-classical understandings of 'Īsā, and the inability to distinguish Mirza and Kaltner's understandings, Mirza was not selected as a primary source though he is writing in the American context.

There are several Muslim authors who have written on the Jesus of Islam outside the ten-year criteria, and these include Smail Balić, Naşr, Lombard, Mahmoud Ayoub, Ahmad Musa Jabril, Shabir Ally, Louay Fatoohi, Milad Milani and Javad Nurbakhsh.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Carole Hillenbrand, "John Kaltner and Younus Y. Mirza, The Bible and the Qur'an: Biblical Figures in the Islamic Tradition," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 21, no. 2 (June 1, 2019), 148–49. <https://doi.org/10.3366/jqs.2019.0386>

⁴¹Smail Balić, "The Image of Jesus in Contemporary Islamic Theology." In *We Believe in One God: The Experience of God in Christianity and Islam*, edited by Annemarie Shimmel and Abdoldjavad Falatūri (New York: Seabury Press, 1979), 1-8; Seyyid Ḥossein Naşr, *Islamic Life and Thought* (Chicago: Kazi Publications, 2001); Seyyid Ḥossein Naşr, "Response to Hans Küng's Paper on Christian-Muslim Dialogue." *The Muslim World* 77, no. 2 (1987): 96–105; Seyyid Ḥossein Naşr. "Comments on a Few Theological Issues in the Islamic-Christian Dialogue." In *Christian-Muslim Encounters*, 458–65. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1995; Seyyid Ḥossein Naşr, "Islamic-Christian Dialogue -Problems and Obstacles to Be Pondered and Overcome." *The Muslim World* 88, no. 3–4 (2007): 218–37; Seyyed Ḥossein Naşr, "'A Common Word' Initiative: Theoria and Praxis." In *Muslim and Christian Understanding: Theory and Application of "a Common Word,"* 21–28. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010; Joseph Lombard, "What of the Word Is Common?" In *Muslim and Christian Understanding: Theory and Application of "a Common Word,"* 93–109. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010; Mahmoud Ayoub, "Jesus the Son of God: A Study of the Terms Ibn and Walad in the Qur'an and Tafsīr Tradition." Edited by Yvonne and Wadi Haddad, *Muslim-Christian Encounters*, 1995, 65–81. "Isā and Jesus: Christ in Islamic Christology," in *Bearing the Word*, edited by Michael Ipgrave (London: Church House Pub, 2005), 87–90; Ahmad Musa Jabril, *The Life of Isa (Jesus) -peace be upon him- in Light of Islam* (2008). http://archive.org/details/way2sona_20170704_2326; Shabir Ally, *Is Jesus God? The Bible Says No!* 3rd edition (Canada: Al-Attique, 2008); Louay Fatoohi, *Jesus the Muslim Prophet: History Speaks of a Human Messiah Not a Divine Christ* (Birmingham: Luna Plena Pub., 2010); Milad Milani, "Representations

Balic offers a summary of Jesus in the formative-classical tradition that will be used in developing a framework for a formative-classical understanding in Chapter 1.1 as a reference for determining variations in contemporary understandings.

Naşr, introduced above, published several works of interest between 1981 and 2010. His *Islamic Life and Thought*, first published in 1981, is an excellent resource for formative-classical understandings. Naşr describes his book as follows: “In this short exposition it is not with such recent reactions but with the traditional Islamic teachings concerning Jesus that we shall concern ourselves.”⁴² In “Response to Hans Küng’s Paper on Christian-Muslim Dialogue,” Naşr introduces an interesting, perhaps unique idea, that when Muslim and Christian doctrine appear to contradict one another, i.e., the crucifixion of Jesus, it may be that both views are correct. He says, “when the Qur’ān states that Christ was not crucified, that does not necessarily mean that God did not want another segment of humanity to see this very reality in a different way.”⁴³ In his “Comments on a Few Theological Issues in the Islamic-Christian Dialogue,” Naşr expounds further upon resolving apparent contradictions in Muslim and Christian theology and suggests that these differences could be reconciled if understood “in a metaphysical and symbolic sense.”⁴⁴ These are not ideas commonly held by Muslim scholars, but they open doors to

of Jesus in Islamic Mysticism: Defining the ‘Sufi Jesus.’” *Literature & Aesthetics* 21, no. 2 (December 2011), 45–64; Javad Nurbakhsh, *Jesus in the Eyes of the Sufis* (New York: Khaniqahi Nimatullahi Publications, 2012).

⁴² Naşr, *Islamic Life and Thought*, 209.

⁴³ Naşr, “Response to Hans Küng’s Paper on Christian-Muslim Dialogue.”, 101.

⁴⁴ Naşr, “Comments on a Few Theological Issues in the Islamic-Christian Dialogue.”, 458.

new understandings that will become apparent in the ideas expressed later by the primary source authors.

Several years later in “Islamic-Christian Dialogue -Problems and Obstacles to Be Pondered and Overcome,” Naşr articulates several obstacles to constructive Muslim-Christian dialogue and suggests that to overcome these obstacles we need to “understand and accept first of all the universal metaphysics and perennial wisdom in light of which it is possible at least for a few who are the universalists to assert the universality of the Truth while accepting each revelation of the Truth as a unique revelation to be deeply respected as being the result of God’s will and reflecting some aspect of His Wisdom.”⁴⁵ Naşr’s disposition towards resolving apparent contradiction affirms my expectation that contemporary Muslim authors writing to the American public may display evolution in understandings regarding the Jesus of Islam. Lastly, in “‘A Common Word’ Initiative: Theoria and Praxis,” Naşr appeals to “the common ground on which we [Muslims and Christians] can meet.”⁴⁶ Encouraging unity among Muslims and Christians he says, “If for both of our religions, God is the greatest reality, and, ultimately, the only Reality, how can our common faith in Him not be the greatest source of accord.”⁴⁷ All of these sayings by Naşr fall outside the ten-year contemporary criteria, but they “open doors to new understandings” as stated earlier.

⁴⁵ Naşr, “Islamic-Christian Dialogue -Problems and Obstacles to Be Pondered and Overcome.”, 236.

⁴⁶ Naşr, “‘A Common Word’ Initiative: Theoria and Praxis.”, 24.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

Lumbard's "What of the Word is Common" affirms Naṣr's approach to resolving apparent contradictions in Muslim-Christian theology. When approaching the understanding of God's Word in Islam and Christianity, Lumbard says, "metaphysics seeks to transcend antagonisms between forms and dogmatic formulations ... to emphasize the absolute truth they are meant to convey rather than expressions of it, which cannot be but relative."⁴⁸ Echoing Naṣr, Lumbard sees concepts like the Word of God as too vast to be accurately explained within any one tradition, or as he says, "the Divine Word ... is infinite and cannot be limited to a single revelation."⁴⁹ These ideas, Naṣr's and Lumbard's, create the opportunity for new understandings of the Jesus of Islam as will be demonstrated by the primary source authors.

Ayoub was a prolific writer and well known in academic circles. In his essay "Jesus the Son of God," he presents another model for formative-classical understanding adhering to Islamic canonical texts. The same can be said of his essay "ʿĪsā and Jesus: Christ in Islamic Christology." Jabril's understandings of the Jesus of Islam would not have challenged formative-classical understandings or demonstrated drifts in those understandings, but they do suggest a tension in the classic understandings of ʿĪsā and Muhammad relating to eschatology which I will demonstrate later. Both Ally's *Is Jesus God?* and Fatoohi's *Jesus the Muslim Prophet* are polemics against the deity of Jesus.

⁴⁸ Lumbard, "What of the Word Is Common?", 95.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 106.

Because they do not address a wider spectrum of topics regarding the Jesus of Islam other than his humanity, they offer no significant departures from formative-classical understandings. Milani in “Representations of Jesus in Islamic Mysticism: Defining the ‘Sufi Jesus’,” attempts to reconcile Sufi understandings of the Jesus of Islam with Christian understandings. His work is not directed to an American context. Milani leans heavily upon the sayings recorded by Khalidi and the analysis of *The Muslim Jesus* in Chapter 1.2 will capture Milani’s understandings as well.

Nurbakhsh’s *Jesus in the Eyes of the Sufis* is a companion to Khalidi’s *The Muslim Jesus* because it offers many of the quotes found in Khalidi’s book and emphasizes their importance in a Sufi context. Nurbakhsh is not well known to the American public and his understandings are captured in Khalidi’s *The Muslim Jesus*. The chapter below examining the movements in understandings of the Jesus of Islam in Khalidi’s book captures most of the sayings in Nurbakhsh’s work making it redundant.

Fazlur Rahman (d. 1988 C.E.) was a well-known Muslim author in America. He published *Major Themes of the Qur’an* which mentions the Jesus of Islam on several occasions, but is primarily limited to: Jesus being asked about teaching trinitarianism on the Day of Judgment, Jesus’ place in the line of prophets, Jesus’ rejection by the Meccans, the vindication of Jesus by being saved from execution by the Jews, and a brief Qur’anic depiction of Jesus.⁵⁰ Jesus of Islam was not the focus of this work and Rahman’s

⁵⁰ Fazlur Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur’an*, 2nd edition (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009), 174, 82-83, 134, 87, 170. The 1st edition was published in 1980.

treatment of him is consistent with formative-classical understandings and outside the ten-year constraint, therefore, it is not included in this research.

Two other works complementary to Khalidi's but outside the contemporary definition need recognition. First, in 2002, Salim Tamari was one of the first to comment on Khalidi's work after its publication. He affirms Khalidi's observation when he says, "A Christian would therefore find these sayings and stories in their totality far closer in spirit to the New Testament Gospels."⁵¹ Tamari's observation will be demonstrated in Chapter 1.2 where the sayings collected by Khalidi begin with a Jesus who needs Allah's permission to perform miracles and moves to a Jesus whose ability to do the miraculous appears intrinsic and without the need to ask Allah's permission. Tamari's review grants Khalidi's conclusion without commenting on its relevance to contemporary understandings of the Jesus of Islam. Second, in 2004, Hājj M. Legenhausen translated *Jesus, Peace Be with Him, through Shiite Narrations*.⁵² This work complemented Khalidi's in that it was a collection of Shiite Hadīth sayings about the Jesus of Islam whereas Khalidi's collection was from Sunnī Hadīth.

The Muslim authors above were not selected as primary sources because their works did not meet one or more of the three criteria. I will introduce six Muslim authors

⁵¹ Salim Tamari, "The Fifth Gospel: Tarif Khalidi on Jesus in the 'Muslim Gospel,'" *Jerusalem Quarterly*, no. 15 (Winter 2002): 39.

⁵² Mahdī Muntazir Qā'im, *Jesus Through Shiite Narrations*, Translated by Muhammad Legenhausen (Qom: The Imam Khomeini Education and Research Institute, 2004).

in Chapters 2 through 4 who were chosen to be primary sources because they met all criteria. It will be shown that none of these authors attempts to identify and measure the departure from formative-classical understandings of their ideas, which affirms the distinctiveness of this research.

Khalidi's observation in 2001, that the Jesus of Islam is evolving, appears to have been unexplored in contemporary contexts. Before I can confirm this, non-Muslim authors writing on the Jesus of Islam need to be surveyed. While these authors' works are excluded *a priori* as primary sources, this thesis will be considered part of this body of literature, and it is necessary to examine these works to identify my distinct contribution.

Relevant authors preceding the contemporary time constraint include Samuel Zwemer who wrote *The Moslem Christ* in 1905 and *The Moslem Doctrine of God* in 1912.⁵³ These works are Christian polemics against Muslim understandings of Jesus focused on formative-classical understandings. Neal Robinson, Geoffrey Parrinder, Kenneth Cragg, Kathleen O'Connor, and Kate Zebiri are representative works on the Jesus of Islam prior to the year 2000.⁵⁴ Robinson, Parrinder and Cragg present Jesus as understood by Islamic Scripture and do not offer contemporary Muslim understandings

⁵³ Samuel Zwemer, *The Moslem Christ & The Moslem Doctrine of God*, (Charlottesville: ANM Publishers, 2010).

⁵⁴ Neal Robinson, *Christ in Islam and Christianity*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991); Geoffrey Parrinder, *Jesus in the Quran* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1965); Kathleen Malone O'Connor, "The Islamic Jesus: Messiahhood and Human Divinity in African American Muslim Exegesis." *Oxford Journals* 66, no. 3 (Autumn 1998): 493–532; Kenneth Cragg, *Jesus and the Muslim: An Exploration*, (Oxford: Oneworld, 1999); Kate Zebiri, *Muslims and Christians Face to Face* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1997).

or address variance in those understandings from formative-classical understandings. O'Connor, as previously noted, is helpful in making the determination to exclude Black Muslim understandings of Jesus from this research because she points out the decline of this community in America and the influence of Druze and Ahmadiyya doctrines upon its Christology.⁵⁵

Kate Zebiri wrote *Muslims and Christians Face to Face* in 1997 and she devotes a chapter to "Muslim Popular Literature on Christianity" and "The Study of Christianity by Muslim Intellectuals."⁵⁶ While presenting many contemporary Muslim scholars' statements about the Jesus of the Gospels and the Jesus of the Qur'an, all of these statements are selected by Zebiri for the purpose of demonstrating "a minimalist interpretation of Jesus, prompted perhaps by a sense of religious rivalry."⁵⁷ Zebiri criticizes the polemical nature of the selected sayings of her authors saying, "this criticism on the part of Muslims is not actually addressed to Christians [it is Muslims writing to Muslims], and since it is usually made in a spirit of aggression, it cannot really be called constructive."⁵⁸ This work is not relevant to this research for three reasons: First, the Muslim criticisms of Jesus are primarily directed at Jesus of the Gospels understandings; second, understandings of the Jesus of Islam offered in contrast are outside the ten-year

⁵⁵ O'Connor, "The Islamic Jesus: Messiahhood and Human Divinity in African American Muslim Exegesis.", 493–532.

⁵⁶ Zebiri, *Muslims and Christians Face to Face*, 44-93; 137-182.

⁵⁷ Ibid, 87.

⁵⁸ Ibid, 87-88.

criteria; and lastly, it is not Zebiri's intent to demonstrate evolution in the understandings of the Jesus of Islam from formative-classical understandings, but to point out the unconstructive nature of the understandings she presents.

Zebiri also wrote an article in 2000 on the miracles of the Jesus of Islam.⁵⁹ Zebiri discusses how the miracles of Jesus in formative-classical understandings are performed with Allah's permission while modern scholars, like Egyptian reformer Muhammad Abduh (d. 1905 CE), "make Jesus more directly instrumental in the miracles, since he brings them about by means of an inherent faculty."⁶⁰ Zebiri limits her focus to miracles and demonstrates awareness of differences in understandings amongst Muslim authors regarding the miracles of the Jesus of Islam, as noted by Khalidi. However, she does not quantify the movements of these understandings from formative-classical Islam nor suggest in what direction these variations may be occurring.

In 2002, Olaf Schumann wrote *Jesus the Messiah in Muslim Thought*. He says, "As far as my knowledge goes, till now except for some articles in journals there is no comprehensive account in Christian circles of Muslim observations on Christ that also takes present day views into account."⁶¹ He said that he intended to offer a "comprehensive coverage of Arabic-Islamic literature on Christ" but decided instead to

⁵⁹ Kate Zebiri, "Contemporary Muslim Understanding of the Miracles of Jesus," *The Muslim World* 90, no. Spring (2000): 71–89.

⁶⁰ *Ibid*, 84.

⁶¹ Olaf H. Schumann, *Jesus the Messiah in Muslim Thought* (Delhi: ISPCK/HMI, 2002), xxvi.

limit his work to “classical Arabic literature” and the understandings of Christ it presents.⁶² Therefore, while Schumann identifies the gap in literature I intend to address, his work does not offer contemporary Muslim understandings to address this gap.

Robert Shedinger wrote *Was Jesus a Muslim?* in 2009 in which he argues for a Muslim identity of Jesus, as defined in formative-classical understandings, to be used to bring Christian understandings into an Islamic framework. He says, “I hope that arguing for a Muslim identity for Jesus may become a liberating lesson for Christians and a key piece in the struggle to improve relations between Christians and Muslims.”⁶³ Shedinger does not address contemporary Muslim understandings.

Between 2009 and 2018, Gabriel Said Reynolds wrote on many Islamic topics relating to Jesus, including, “Jesus the Muslim Hippie,” “The Muslim Jesus, Dead or alive?,” “The Quran and the apostles of Jesus,” “Jesus for Muslims” and “Muslim Perceptions of Jesus.” Reynolds says, “This Jesus of medieval Islamic traditions is the Jesus of most modern Islamic representations of Jesus.”⁶⁴ He affirms Khalidi’s observations with this statement and offers some “modern representations of Jesus,” but it is not his objective to demonstrate how these representations are changes from formative-classical understandings. Further he states, “The contemporary Islamic

⁶² Ibid, xxxiii.

⁶³ Robert F. Shedinger, *Was Jesus a Muslim? Questioning Categories in the Study of Religion* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 17.

⁶⁴ Gabriel Said Reynolds, “Jesus the Muslim Hippie,” *First Things*, no. December 2013 (2013): 22.

conception of Jesus is hardly a simple reflection of what the Qur'ān says about him [Jesus]. Indeed, in many ways this conception developed despite the Qur'ān, and not because of it.”⁶⁵ In 2010, Oddbjørn Leirvik referenced Khalidi's work in his second edition of *Images of Christ in Islam* saying, “Khalidi's book has taken historical-critical research on the Muslim Jesus a significant step forward.”⁶⁶ But Leirvik does not address Khalidi's observation that the Jesus of Islam is evolving.

In 2015 James Beverley and Craig Evans wrote *Getting Jesus Right: How Muslims get Jesus and Islam Wrong*. Like Zwemer's work, this is a Christian polemic against Muslim understandings of Jesus focused on formative-classical understandings. In the authors' own words, “[This book] is an extended argument that humanity should choose Christian faith for spiritual truth, not Islam.”⁶⁷ Anees Zaka's *Christology in Islam and the Biblical Antithesis* is also a Christian polemic against Islam without consideration of changes in understandings of the Jesus of Islam. Zaka provides a good resource for formative-classical understandings of the Jesus of Islam.⁶⁸

Some of the most recent works on this topic include that of David Pinault, Mark Beaumont, Carlos Andrés Segovia, Richard Shumack, and Emil Shehadeh. In 2018, Pinault wrote *The Crucifix on Mecca's Front Porch: A Christian's Companion for the Study of*

⁶⁵ Ibid, 23.

⁶⁶ Oddbjørn Leirvik, *Images of Jesus Christ in Islam*, 2nd ed (New York: Continuum, 2010), 13.

⁶⁷ James A. Beverley and Craig A. Evans, *Getting Jesus Right: How Muslims Get Jesus and Islam Wrong* (Lagoon City: Castle Quay Books, 2015), Kindle Edition, Introduction.

⁶⁸ Anees Zaka, *Christology in Islam and the Biblical Antithesis*, (Philadelphia: Church Without Walls, 2017).

Islam.⁶⁹ While the Jesus of Islam is not Pinault's focus, when he is addressed, it is generally regarding Muslim formative-classical understandings and how they diverge from Jesus of the Gospel understandings. Pinault references Tarif Khalidi, Reza Aslan and Mustafa Akyol, to bring attention to the variance of their understandings from Jesus of the Gospels understandings. Pinault's work is an argument for the truth of Christianity and therefore is focused on how Muslim understandings of Jesus differ from Christian understandings rather than how contemporary Muslim authors' understandings may differ from formative-classical understandings, which is my intent. Also in 2018, Beaumont wrote *Jesus in Muslim-Christian Conversation*.⁷⁰ This work offers two imaginative dialogues between a Christian and a Muslim. Both articulate their understandings of Jesus offering equal and honest exchanges. This work is a good foundation for winsome Muslim-Christian dialogue, while the Muslim understandings presented are those of the author and not intended to represent contemporary American Muslim understandings.

Segovia's work, *The Quranic Jesus: A New Interpretation*, supposes the Qur'an is a compilation of several authors over time. It argues that the Qur'an's original Christology was much more like Christian Christology but was supplanted by later Qur'anic authors to unite divided Arabic tribes under one person by elevating the "human messenger" [Jesus]

⁶⁹ David Pinault, *The Crucifix on Mecca's Front Porch: A Christian's Companion for the Study of Islam* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2018).

⁷⁰ Mark Beaumont, *Jesus in Muslim-Christian Conversation* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2018).

above the “heavenly messenger” [Gabriel].⁷¹ Segovia cannot be considered a primary source because he is not Muslim nor is he writing primarily to an American public. Further, his ideas are not intended to demonstrate variation in understandings of the Jesus of Islam since formative-classical understandings. Instead, Segovia’s focus is on pre-formative-classical understandings suggesting that they experienced change before becoming formative-classical understandings due to the political interests of Qur’anic authors who contributed to the Qur’anic text at various places in time.

In 2020 Richard Shumack wrote *Jesus Through Muslim Eyes*.⁷² Shumack uses formative-classical understandings, without variation, of the Jesus of Islam to suggest he “is not at home in Islam” among the other prophets.⁷³ Emil Shehadeh’s *Between Muhammad and Jesus*, written in 2022, is another excellent resource for understanding formative-classical understandings of the Jesus of Islam, but Shehadeh’s focus is to compare Jesus and Muhammad using formative-classical texts.⁷⁴ Finding no major published works or theses relevant to this topic as published by non-Muslim authors, I turn to other works that may have significance but are outside my parameters.

⁷¹ Carlos Andrés Segovia, *The Quranic Jesus: A New Interpretation* (Judaism, Christianity, Islam - Tension, Transmission, Transformation), volume 5 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2019), 136.

⁷² Richard Shumack, *Jesus Through Muslim Eyes* (SPCK, 2020).

⁷³ Ibid, 120.

⁷⁴ Emil Shehadeh, *Between Muhammad and Jesus, A Matter of Greatness: According to Muslim Scripture*, 2nd edition (Candor Publishing, 2022).

Two other authors need mention to conclude this review. Damian Howard in his essay “Who Do You Say that I Am?” suggests that drifts of both Christianity and Islam towards historical Jesus understandings will not promote productive interfaith dialogue between Muslims and Christians.⁷⁵ He references Khalidi’s *The Muslim Jesus* to suggest that Muslims are already on a path to “embellish the Qur’ān’s portrait of Jesus.”⁷⁶ The important point to note is his observation that there are movements, in Islam and Christianity, toward understandings of Jesus articulated by the Historical Jesus movement and “embellished” understandings of Qur’anic Jesus in Islam. I will demonstrate that Reza Aslan’s *Zealot* reconstructs the Jesus of Islam within a historical Jesus framework.⁷⁷ Howard’s essay suggests that there are indeed variations in understandings of the Jesus of Islam away from formative-classical understandings. While Zebiri, Reynolds and Howard suggest drifts in understandings of the Jesus of Islam in contemporary contexts, their focus on those variations is limited and does not attempt to classify or measure relative to formative-classical understandings.

Lastly, Walter Schumm in his article “Variations in Themes of Asceticism, Humility, and Love among Muslim Sayings Attributed to Jesus,” attempts to correlate understandings of the Jesus of Islam in Khalidi’s *The Muslim Jesus* to Gospel (New

⁷⁵ Damian Howard, “Who Do You Say That I Am?: Christians and Muslims Disputing the Historical Jesus,” *Neotestamentica* 49, no. 2 (2015): 297–320.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 302.

⁷⁷ The “historical Jesus” framework positions Jesus as a purely historical character without divinity or supernatural abilities. This framework denies the virgin birth, miracles, resurrection, and divinity of Christ.

Testament) sayings.⁷⁸ Schumm's interest to demonstrate variations in sayings in *The Muslim Jesus* is similar to this research, but he does not address a contemporary context and only surveys drifts *towards* Gospel understandings. Using a methodology he created, he assigns a "low," "medium," or "high" correlation for each Muslim saying to a New Testament saying. His measurement method determines that in matters of humility and love, the Jesus of Islam in Khalidi's collection of sayings is closer to New Testament understandings than when assessed using other themes.⁷⁹ Schumm's method of quantifying qualitative research is relevant to this thesis and will be adopted with minor modifications as outlined in the "Methods/Research Approach" below.

I have determined through this literature review that several authors (Tamari, Reynolds, Pinault, and Howard) agree with Khalidi that the Jesus of Islam is evolving. Schumann said that as of his work in 2002, "there is no comprehensive account in Christian circles of Muslim observations on Christ that also takes present day views into account." This review demonstrates that Schumann's observation remains true to the present day. I intend to address the gap identified by Schumann and contribute to a distinct category of literature; non-Muslims writing about contemporary Muslims' understandings of the Jesus of Islam.

⁷⁸ Walter R. Schumm, "Variations in Themes of Asceticism, Humility, and Love among Muslim Sayings Attributed to Jesus," *Islamic Studies* 44, no. 1 (2005): 113–23.

⁷⁹ *Ibid*, 116.

After surveying works authored by both Muslim and non-Muslims about the Jesus of Islam, including the Yaqeen Institute that forms part of the American scene but did not bear directly upon my primary source authors or offer long or developed treatments of my topic, I have concluded that none has attempted to identify and quantify variations in understandings of the Jesus of Islam in a contemporary American context. However, there are six contemporary Muslim authors who offer distinct understandings of the Jesus of Islam in an American context and meet my three criteria. These authors have been selected to be the primary sources for my research and will be introduced in Chapters 2 -4. I will attempt to identify and quantify the variations in understandings of the Jesus of Islam they may present and contribute to the gap in the literary category identified above.

Methods/Research Approach

This is a text-based, qualitative research project utilizing a textual analysis process recommended by Frey, Botan, and Kreps.⁸⁰ This technique focuses on describing the content, structure, and functions of themes contained in texts. There are four major approaches to textual analysis: rhetorical criticism, content analysis, interaction analysis, and performance studies.⁸¹ I will employ content analysis which is used to identify, enumerate, and analyze occurrences of specific messages and message characteristics [themes] embedded in texts.⁸²

Schumm's methodology has been adapted to accommodate my findings. Schumm attempted to compare understandings, as I will, but with a different focus. Schumm set out to demonstrate correlation of Khalidi's collected sayings with Gospel understandings. This research seeks to correlate the understandings of the primary sources with formative-classical understandings, specifically the understanding articulated in Chapter 1.1. Though the objects of correlation differ, Schumm's methodology is directly applicable with minor modification.

I am interested in the evolution of understandings of the Jesus of Islam from formative-classical understandings by the primary source authors. Utilizing a

⁸⁰ Lawrence R. Frey, Carl H. Botan, and Gary L. Kreps, *Investigating Communication: An Introduction to Research Methods*, 2nd ed., (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 2000), chap. 9.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid.

modification of Schumm's measurement method, any observed movements will be categorized thematically and assigned a Movement Theme. Each Movement Theme will be assigned one of four classifications to indicate the observed evolution from formative-classical understandings. The four classifications are: The theme is *consistent* with formative-classical understandings, the theme *complements* formative-classical understandings without creating tension or conflict, the theme creates *tension* with formative-classical understandings, and the theme *conflicts* with formative-classical understandings. The key words differentiating the classifications are italicized.

In summary, analysis of messages within the text yields several important themes which can be categorized. These themes can be used as described above to identify variations in contemporary understandings of the Jesus of Islam from formative-classical understandings. Conflict with formative-classical understandings can be observed when an author rejects a particular component of the formative-classical understandings of 'Īsā, for example, how one affirms or denies his miracles, crucifixion, or virgin birth. The essence of textual analysis is to determine how someone thinks regarding a particular topic by studying patterns, random statements, or omissions in their text regarding the topic of interest. This methodology should provide meaningful analysis. Evolution in understandings from formative-classical understandings will be derived from the authors'

views using data collection, categorization, and determination of interrelationships between the categories of information collected.⁸³

To address the research question, Chapter 1.1 establishes a framework for understanding the Jesus of Islam according to formative-classical views. ʿĪsā is examined thematically to include his origin, birth, titles, mission, Gospel (*Injīl*), miracles, death, and eschatological role. Chapter 1.2 surveys Khalidi's observation regarding the evolution of Jesus in Islam and identifies several themes from his collected sayings demonstrating variations from formative-classical understandings. These themes are precursors to themes that emerge in the writings and teachings of contemporary American Muslim scholars and are useful to identify continuity in evolution of changes in understandings from formative-classical understandings. I have followed Frey, Botan, and Kreps' approach to perform content analysis of the selected texts for qualitative changes. Being a text-based research project, the primary sources were not interviewed. However, I have reviewed other relevant works of these authors and have inspected the primary source texts carefully to highlight specific themes relating to the research question and their movements from formative-classical understandings.⁸⁴

⁸³ John W. Creswell and J. David Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*, Fifth edition (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2018), 31.

⁸⁴ Listed here are works by the primary sources that I reviewed but did not directly engage in this thesis because of duplicate or non-relevant content. Relevant works are listed in the Bibliography and footnoted when engaged. Mustafa Akyol, "Interview with Islamic Reformer Mustafa Akyol: 'Islam Needs Its Own Enlightenment' - Qantara.De," Qantara.de - Dialogue with the Islamic World. Accessed January 25, 2022; *The Jesus of Christianity and Islam: Can We Reconcile the Two?*, 2020. <https://youtu.be/X5ZX5wKj-WQ>. Reza Aslan, all his works are engaged by the thesis. Ali J. Ataie, *Prophet Muhammed In Bible*, Accessed June 22, 2022, <http://archive.org/details/109643695ProphetMuhammadInBibleThesisAliAtai>; *Reading the Bible*

Part I - Historical Muslim Understandings of the Jesus of Islam

Chapter 1.1 discusses formative-classical understandings of the Jesus of Islam.

These understandings are taken from the Qur'an, Hadīth, Sufi writings, and Ibn Kathīr's *Stories of the Prophets* and *The Islamic View of Jesus*. Through these sources, and other scholars' understandings of these sources, I will derive a reference understanding from which variations of contemporary Muslim authors' understandings will be measured.

Chapter 1.2 explores Khalidi's *The Muslim Jesus*, which is the catalyst for this research, and includes sayings about the Jesus of Islam collected by Khalidi from the 8th – 18th centuries CE. These sayings are summarized and their departures from formative-classical understandings highlighted where appropriate. Understanding the changes Khalidi observed, leading to his assertion that the Jesus of Islam is advancing, is helpful to address the research question: Are the same trends in movement continuing today or are different ones emerging as demonstrated by contemporary Muslim authors writing to an American context?

in the Context of the Qur'an | Dr. Ali Ataie, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XPpMG7b9p48>.
Fatih Harpci, Haylamaz, Resit, and Fatih Harpci, *Sultan of Hearts: Prophet Muhammad. Volume 1 and 2*, Place of publication not identified: Tughra Books, 2014. Yasin al-Jibouri, *Allah: The Concept of God in Islam: (Volume One)*, Vol. 1. 2 vols., AuthorHouse, 2012; *Allah: The Concept of God in Islam: (Volume Two)*. Vol. 2. 2 vols. Authorhouse, 2013; Jibouri, Yasin T al-, and `Abbas ibn Muhammad Rida Qummi, *Stages of the Hereafter: The Path to Eternity*, 2014. Zeki Saritoprak, *Jesus in Islam*, YouTube, 2014, <https://youtu.be/864fLOF8knl>; "The Mahdi Question According to Bediüzzaman Said Nursi." In *Third International Symposium on Bediüzzaman Said Nursi*, 2:483–97, 1995; "The Mahdī Tradition in Islam: A Social-Cognitive Approach." *Islamic Studies* 41, no. 4 (2002): 651–74. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20837234>.

Chapter 1 - Foundations for a Formative-Classical Framework of the Jesus of Islam & Movements in Later Centuries

1.1 Foundations for a Formative-Classical Framework of the Jesus of Islam

No short survey can give a comprehensive account of every understanding of the Jesus of Islam (ʿĪsā) in forming a formative-classical framework, but the following discussion aims to capture important facets of discussion according to a representative cross-section of leading figures of Islam exegeting sources from the first seven Islamic centuries. I will use core Qurʾanic statements and how they were understood in the early tradition to define the referential formative-classical understanding. The Jesus of Islam will be examined thematically to include his origin, birth, titles, mission, Gospel (*Injīl*), miracles, death, and eschatological role using the Qurʾan, Hadīth, Sufi writings, and the understandings of leading figures of Islam exegeting these sources.

Understanding the origin of ʿĪsā is of importance to Islam. Origin refers to the beginning of ʿĪsā’s existence: Was he created or is he an eternal being preexisting all creation? That ʿĪsā is a created being is made clear in Qurʾan 19. God’s Spirit appears to Mary and says he is here to “give you the gift of a pure son.”⁸⁵ Mary questions how this can happen when she has not been intimate with a man. She becomes pregnant and

⁸⁵ Qurʾan 19:19; all references are from Talal Itani, *The Quran in English* (Plano: ClearQuran, 2017), unless otherwise stated.

carries the child to term. When she is accused of unchastity the child speaks from the cradle:

I am the servant of God. He has given me the Scripture and made me a prophet. And He has made me blessed wherever I may be; and has enjoined on me prayer and charity, so long as I live ... Peace is upon me the day I was born, and the day I die, and the day I get resurrected alive.⁸⁶

ʿĪsā is a created being with a birth, “the day I was born,” and a death, “the day I die,” to come.

Closely related to the origin of ʿĪsā is the nature of his birth. While ʿĪsā’s birth is through the Spirit of God, the term Spirit also accompanies the coming of the Qur’an.⁸⁷ Qur’an 2:97 suggests that Gabriel should be identified with the Spirit of God since “it is he who revealed it [Qur’an] to your heart by God’s leave.” Using the work of Ibn Kathīr from an important Islamic genre, *Stories of the Prophets*, we learn that the nature of the birth of ʿĪsā was that God created a baby in Mary’s womb, much in the fashion he created Adam, and this was done through the angel Gabriel who was present with her.⁸⁸

⁸⁶ Qur’an 19:30-33.

⁸⁷ Qur’an 16:102-104.

⁸⁸ Ismāʿīl ibn ʿUmar ibn Kathīr, *Stories of the Prophets*, Translated by Husain Maqbool, 1st edition (Riyadh: International Islamic Publishing House, 2006), 547. Ibn Kathīr said, “Allah mentions that He created ʿEesa from a mother, without a father, and that He created Prophet Adam without a father and mother” with no further distinction. Also see Peter Laffoon, “The Qur’anic Word *Rūḥ* and Its Restricted Interpretations: An Analysis of Classical *Tafsīr* Tradition.” *Islam and Christian–Muslim Relations* 34, no. 1 (2022): 54. Laffoon compares the commentaries of Abū Jaʿfar Muḥammad ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, ʿAbd Allāh al-Baydāwī (d. 1286 CE) and Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī and says, “The classical Islamic exegetes stayed within the same interpretation grid for most verses concerning *rūḥ* [spirit, soul or breath], seeing it as referring to Gabriel, a super angel/metaphysical creature, a created soul or divine inspiration transmitted by God, or else they remained silent and did not offer any interpretation.”

According to the Qur'an, 'Īsā is like Adam in that he is created by God but is not in any physical sense God's son.⁸⁹ The Islamic narrative records the circumstances of the birth of 'Īsā as born of a virgin (Mary), an act of God and the Spirit working through her, not an incarnation of God.

'Īsā has many titles to include "Jesus son of Mary," "Messiah son of Mary," "Word of God" and "Prophet." "Jesus son of Mary" occurs over twenty times in the Qur'an. Qur'an 4:171 teaches that referring to 'Īsā as the "son of Mary" in Islam is usually understood as deterring anyone from thinking he is the son of God in any divine sense.⁹⁰ Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 1209 CE) says he is called "son of God" in the Gospels, but this is meant more like "a high honor or friend of God" not divinity.⁹¹ The Qur'an says:

The Jews said, "Ezra is the son of God," and the Christians said, "The Messiah is the son of God." These are their statements, out of their mouths. They emulate the statements of those who blasphemed before. May God assail them! How deceived they are!⁹²

This verse cautions against using "son of God" to imply equality with God or some form of special kinship with God. Muslims see "son of God" as a devaluation of the

⁸⁹ Ibn Kathīr, *The Islamic View of Jesus: (Peace Be upon Him)*, Translated by Tamir Abu As-Su'ood Muhammad, (New Delhi: Islamic Book Service, 2006), 26. Also see Oliver Leaman, "ISA," in *The Qur'an: An Encyclopedia* (London: Routledge, 2005), 305.

⁹⁰ Ibn Kathīr, *The Islamic View of Jesus*, 46. Ibn Kathīr exegetes Qur'an 4:171-173 as saying that 'Jesus son of Mary' indicates that Jesus was no more than "a Messenger of Allah and His Word, which He bestowed on Mary, and a Spirit proceeding from Him ... say not Trinity." Also see Parrinder, *Jesus in the Quran*, 23.

⁹¹ Al-Rāzī, *Al-Tafsīral-Kabīr*, 34; as cited in Ayoub, "Jesus the Son of God: A Study of the Terms Ibn and Walad in the Qur'an and Tafsīr Tradition," 72. Al-Rāzī was a theologian/philosopher and Qur'an commentator who, according to Ayoub, "did not accept easy answers and gave his opponents a fair hearing."

⁹² Qur'an 9:30.

transcendence of God and the Qur'an cites "son of God" as a title used by Christians of Jesus and not to be used by Muslims.⁹³

A closely related title is "Messiah son of Mary" or "Messiah." Discussed in Surahs 3,4,5 & 9, this title is given to Jesus to identify him as a "messenger to the children of Israel" (Qur'an 3:49). The close connection of "Messiah" with "son of Mary" is meant to deter any temptation to assign him divinity, as discussed above. Jesus the Messiah was a prophet sent to Israel to bring the message of Tawhīd, the oneness of God, to the "People of the Scripture" (Qur'an 4:171).

Regarding the title "Word of God," Qur'an 4:171 says, "The Messiah, Jesus, the son of Mary, is the Messenger of God, and His Word." Legenhausen says:

The exegetes (mufassirin) of the Qur'an have disputed the question of why Jesus is called "Word of God." Generally, they agree (explicitly or implicitly) that the term is not to be understood as the Logos in the Christian sense. However, according to some exegetes, there is an important connection between the "Word of God" as a title for the Messiah, and the creative word of God; not because Jesus as Logos plays any part in creation, but because Jesus is directly created by the command of God without the mediation of a father. This view is in agreement with most of the commentators, both Shi'a and Sunni, as well as Western scholarship.⁹⁴

ʿĪsā is "His Word" because he came into being by the "word" of God, much like Adam was created. Abū al-Qāsim Jār Allāh Maḥmūd ibn ʿUmar al-Zamakhsharī (d. 1143 CE) says ʿĪsā

⁹³ Ibn Kathīr, *The Islamic View of Jesus*, 46. Ibn Kathīr says that Jesus was no more than "a Messenger of Allah and His Word, and a Spirit proceeding from Him ... say not Trinity." Also see Hans Küng, *Islam: Past, Present and Future* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2009), 490–91.

⁹⁴ Ḥājj M. Legenhausen, "Jesus as Kalimat Allah [The Word of God]," 3. Also see Ibn Kathīr, *Stories of the Prophets*, 565. Ibn Kathīr, contrasting various understandings among Jews, Christians, and "believers," says Jesus is not the result of adultery, or Allah, or a Son of Allah, he is "a word from Allah bestowed on Maryam."

is the “Word of God” in the sense that he came into being by God’s word, not that he is eternal like God’s Word the Qur’an, or in the sense Christians believe Jesus is eternal.⁹⁵ The designation of ʿĪsā as the “Word of God” implies he was created as a result of a creative command by God and also denotes that he comes bearing the “Word of God,” “a revealed book,” his *Injīl*, which will be discussed later.

The last title of significance is “Prophet” which also determines the mission of ʿĪsā. In the Qur’an, all prophets possessed some degree of Muhammad’s perfection, but tradition came to revere Muhammad above all the other prophets because he was given the revelation of the perfect religion.⁹⁶ The main aim of the stories of the prophets in the Qur’an is to foretell and validate the coming ministry of the final Prophet, Muhammad.⁹⁷ Qur’an 61:6 firmly positions ʿĪsā among the other prophets, “And when Jesus son of Mary

⁹⁵ Abū al-Qāsim Jār Allāh Maḥmūd ibn ʿUmar al-Zamakhsharī, *al-Kashshāf ʿan haqāʾiq al-Tanzīl wa-ʿuyūn al-aqāwīl fi Wujūh al-Taʾwīl*, 4 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-ʿArabi, n.d.), 1: 584; as cited in Ayoub, “Jesus the Son of God: A Study of the Terms Ibn and Walad in the Qur’an and Tafsīr Tradition,” 77. Al-Zamakhsharī was a medieval Muslim scholar of Iranian descent and a Muʿtazilite theologian, linguist, poet and interpreter of the Qur’an. He is best known for his book *al-Kashshāf*. Also see Grant R. Kynaston, “Jesus as God’s Word: A Comparative Study in Islamic and Christian Theologies.” *Australian Journal of Islamic Studies* 3, no. 2 (2018), 83. Kynaston offers helpful understandings of ʿĪsā as the “word of God” including “vessel for something conveyed by God,” “vehicle by which God presents His word to mankind,” and “instrument through whom God expresses revelation through His attribute of speech” (See page 80). Also see Fatih Harpci, “A Common Word: Global Faith and Pluralism in Islam.” In *Sacred Texts & Human Contexts*, edited by Nathan R. Kollar and Muhammad Shafiq, 304–15. (North Charleston: CreateSpace Independent Publishing, 2014), 308. Harpci affirms Kynaston’s understanding but goes beyond this to say, “The words of God were revealed to Jesus ... and he may be a common word between the adherents of Christianity and Islam.” The implication is that Jesus’ words could provide understandings that promote dialogue between Muslims and Christians which reflects the purpose of his thesis to be discussed later.

⁹⁶ Lloyd V. J. Ridgeon, “Christianity as Portrayed by Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī,” in Ridgeon ed., *Islamic Interpretations of Christianity* (Richmond: Curzon, 2001), 107.

⁹⁷ Ibn Kathīr, *The Islamic View of Jesus*, 79. Ibn Kathīr says that Jesus was the last prophet sent to the Israelites and his purpose was to point to the “seal of the Prophets” [Muhammad]. Also see Leirvik, *Images of Jesus Christ in Islam*, 26.

said, ‘O Children of Israel, I am God’s Messenger to you, confirming what preceded me of the Torah, and announcing good news of a messenger who will come after me, whose name is Ahmad.’” The mission of ‘Īsā was to confirm the Torah and announce to his people, the Jews, the coming of “Ahmad” who is commonly considered to be Muhammad by Muslims.

As a prophet or messenger, ‘Īsā participated in a long line of prophets to bring a message from God, his *Injīl*, which was a book of divine revelation like the *Tawrāh* and *Zabūr* (Law and Psalter). What was the *Injīl* that ‘Īsā was to give to mankind as part of his mission? Qur’an 5:46 says, “In their footsteps, We sent Jesus son of Mary, fulfilling the Torah that preceded him; and We gave him the Gospel [*Injīl*], wherein is guidance and light.” There are differing opinions among scholars regarding this Gospel but there is agreement that the Gospel of ‘Īsā, his *Injīl*, was a message centered on the Tawḥīd or oneness of God, like the Torah given to Moses, which later came to be lost, distorted or misinterpreted.⁹⁸

‘Īsā was empowered to perform miracles only by Allah’s leave. Islamic tradition

⁹⁸ Parrinder, *Jesus in the Quran*, 145-146. Parrinder says there is no suggestion in the Qur’an that the Gospel given to ‘Īsā was not the same as the Gospels of Christianity and Qur’an 45:15-16 and 19:37-38 suggest there were differences of interpretation of both the Torah and Gospel; the misunderstandings of the Gospel of the Jesus of Islam were due to sin not defects in the book. Also see Martin Whittingham, “What Is ‘The Gospel’ Mentioned in the Qur’an?” In *CMCS Research Briefings*, Issue 6:8 (Oxford: Centre for Muslim Christian Studies, 2016),2-6. Whittingham says, “According to the Qur’ān, the *Injīl* is a message sent down to Jesus in the same way that the Torah was sent to Moses and the Qur’ān to Muhammad, that is, without any human involvement. The clear assumption in Muslim thinking is that the *Injīl* took on the form of a book, as did the Qur’ān. But the Qur’ān does not provide much comment on the content of the *Injīl*.” Finally, Whittingham says, “There is persistent ambiguity over what the *Injīl* could be,” which affirms my observation.

credits him with many miraculous actions including healing the blind and leprous, bringing the dead to life, having a special knowledge about what people ate and stored in their homes, and fashioning a living bird from clay. He was also given the ability to speak as a babe in the cradle to defend his mother's reputation and tell of his prophetic calling.⁹⁹ There is no shortage of miracles performed by ʿĪsā, but what significance is given by Muslim scholars to these miraculous deeds? The Qur'an indicates this in the miracle known as the 'table laden with food':

And when the disciples said, "O Jesus son of Mary, is your Lord able to bring down for us a feast from heaven?" He said, "Fear God, if you are believers." They said, "We wish to eat from it, so that our hearts may be reassured, and know that you have told us the truth, and be among those who witness it." Jesus son of Mary said, "O God, our Lord, send down for us a table from heaven, to be a festival for us, for the first of us, and the last of us, and a sign from You; and provide for us; You are the Best of providers." God said, "I will send it down to you. But whoever among you disbelieves thereafter, I will punish him with a punishment the like of which I never punish any other being."¹⁰⁰

It is important that ʿĪsā does not take credit for the miracle but says, "O God, our Lord, send down for us a table from heaven [as] ...a sign from You." ʿĪsā tells us why the

⁹⁹ Qur'an 3:46; Qur'an 19:30-33. See ibn Kathīr, *Stories of the Prophets*, 562-563. Ibn Kathīr reports that once "a voice cried out to her [Mary] from below." He says scholars have two opinions on this: First, Ibn ʿAbbās and others said it was Jibreel's voice; the second opinion from Mujahid, Hasan, and others, is that it was the voice of ʿĪsā. This suggests that formative-classical understandings reserved the possibility that ʿĪsā spoke from the womb. Also see Norman Calder, Andrew Rippin, and Jawid Mojaddedi, eds. *Classical Islam: A Sourcebook of Religious Literature*, Second edition (London: Routledge, 2013), 105. Quoting Muṭarrif al-Ṭarafī (d. 1062) *Storie dei profeti*, Genova, 1997: "Their censure of her increased ... such that she pointed to him (Q 19/29), that is, to Jesus, indicating that they should speak to him. So they said to her, 'How can we speak to one who is still in the cradle, a child?' (Q 19/29) The like of Jesus had not been known before and his ability to speak had not begun, so they thought that Mary was mocking them." This understanding implies Jesus did not speak from the womb previously.

¹⁰⁰ Qur'an 5:112-115.

miracle was given when God replies to him and says, “I will send it ... But whoever among you disbelieves ... I will punish.” According to the Qur’an, ‘Īsā was given the ability to perform miracles by God as a sign that he was a prophet from God with a message, his Gospel. The table of food, and other miracles, were given as signs from God so that the people might believe in ‘Īsā and his message.

I summarize the Qur’an on the purpose and source of miracles performed through the prophets: To draw attention to the teachings of the one through whom the miracle is done, the source being Allah, and to divide people according to their response.¹⁰¹ ‘Īsā’s mission was to share his message, the Gospel, which he was given by God. While the exact nature of that Gospel is not defined in the Qur’an, it does give us clues about its nature and teachings. ‘Īsā gives us insight into the Gospel when he says God will say to him, “O Jesus son of Mary, did you say to the people, ‘Take me and my mother as gods rather than God?’ [I] will say, ‘Glory be to You! It is not for me to say what I have no right to. Had I said it, You would have known it.’”¹⁰² ‘Īsā’s message was a warning against polytheism, specifically the tritheistic teachings of the Christians.

One could think that because ‘Īsā performed more miracles than Muhammad he may have been more favored by God, but this is not the teaching of the Qur’an. Ibn Rabbān al-Ṭabarī (d. 870 CE) can help us understand the significance of ‘Īsā’s miracles. He

¹⁰¹ Al-Bukhārī 6:61:504. Al-Bukhārī says, “Every Prophet was given miracles because of which people believed.” From Al-Bukhārī, *Sahih al-Bukhārī* ((s.l.): Mohee Uddin, 2020). All al-Bukhārī quotes will be from this version unless stated otherwise.

¹⁰² Qur’an 5:116.

practiced Christianity for seventy years before converting to Islam. First, he suggested the virgin birth of ʿĪsā was no more special than the birth of Adam, and like ʿĪsā, Elijah did many miracles including reviving a dead person, ensuring the widow’s oil did not run out, and asking God to withhold rain for seven years. Second, ʿĪsā may have fed five thousand people in a day, but Moses asked God to feed millions of people for forty years and God provided both manna and quail for them to eat [Qur’an 2:57]. Third, while ʿĪsā may have walked on water and calmed the seas, Moses parted the sea and Muhammad walked on air in his night journey to Jerusalem (*Al-Isrā’ wal-Mi’rāj*) [Qur’an 2:50; Qur’an 17]. Lastly, the ascension of ʿĪsā is not unique among the prophets because Enoch and Elijah both were taken to heaven in similar manner.¹⁰³

Miracles in the Qur’an draw attention to the messenger or prophet so the message or book they have been given from God will be obeyed. They are not intended to impute any supernatural or divine attributes to the prophet since the miracles originate from God and not the prophet. The miracles of ʿĪsā were significant signs of his status as a prophet but not necessarily evidence of any special status over the preceding prophets and certainly not to be taken as a sign of divine power.

The manner and timing of the death of ʿĪsā are important. They are intricately intertwined with Muslim eschatological views to be discussed later. There are differing

¹⁰³ ʿAlī ibn Sahl Rabbān al-Ṭabarī, *The Polemical Works of ʿAlī al-Ṭabarī*, Edited and translated by Rifaat Y. Ebied and David Thomas, *History of Christian-Muslim Relations*, volume 27, (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 48-60.

accounts within Islamic literature regarding ʿĪsā’s last hours on earth, but they all stem from the Qur’an’s account:

And for their saying, “We have killed the Messiah, Jesus, the son of Mary, the Messenger of God.” In fact, they did not kill him, nor did they crucify him, but it appeared to them as if they did. Indeed, those who differ about him are in doubt about it. They have no knowledge of it, except the following of assumptions. Certainly, they did not kill him. Rather, God raised him up to Himself. God is Mighty and Wise.¹⁰⁴

According to the Qur’an the Jews wanted to kill ʿĪsā and believed that they had, but somehow ʿĪsā did not die at their hands nor did they (the Jews) crucify him. Instead, ʿĪsā was “raised up” by God to Himself.¹⁰⁵ This does not tell us exactly how ʿĪsā’s life on earth ended. Was he crucified by someone other than the Jews? Did he die before he was taken up to God and if so, how? Did someone else die in his place giving the appearance that he had in fact been crucified? Ibn Kathīr would answer these questions as saying that “the Children of Israel [Jews]” tried to kill [crucify] him, but Allah “raised him [ʿĪsā] up” and made another person look like him so that the Jews took their revenge on this

¹⁰⁴ Qur’an 4:157-158. Also see Todd Lawson, *The Crucifixion and the Qur’an: A Study in the History of Muslim Thought* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2009), 2-3.

¹⁰⁵ Al-Ṭabarī, “The Story of Jesus Son of Mary and His Mother,” In *The History of al-Ṭabarī, The Ancient Kingdoms IV* (Albany: State University of New York, 1987), 122. Al-Ṭabarī affirms this interpretation saying, “They wanted to crucify him, but God raised him up to Himself.” Also see David Marshall, “The Resurrection of Jesus and the Qur’an.” in *Resurrection Reconsidered*, edited by Gavin D’Costa (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 1996), 171. Marshall says, “For our present purposes, we must note that on the accepted Muslim reading of this passage, the Jesus whom God vindicated by raising him up had never died, and it is suggested that someone else died in his place. God’s raising up of Jesus would then be an ascension without a prior death or resurrection, reminiscent of the exaltation of Elijah (2 Kgs. 2:1-12).” Also see Robinson, *Christ in Islam and Christianity*, chap. 12 and 13.

other person.¹⁰⁶ Qur'an 19:33 reads, "So Peace is upon me the day I was born, and the day I die, and the Day I get resurrected alive." 'Īsā will die and he will be resurrected (raised up), but does this occur at his crucifixion? Formative-classical understandings deny the death of 'Īsā by crucifixion and give him the honor of being taken up to heaven where he awaits the eschatological events to be discussed below, which will include a death and resurrection.¹⁰⁷ Formative-classical understandings, while denying the crucifixion of Jesus, uses the historical event of a crucifixion of someone other than Jesus to make the theological point that God's word is immortal; by removing 'Īsā, "the word of God," before he can be killed.¹⁰⁸ According to Oliver Leaman, God's response to people

¹⁰⁶ Ibn Kathīr, *Stories of the Prophets*, 572. Also see Delbert Royce Burkett, ed., *The Blackwell Companion to Jesus*, Blackwell Companions to Religion, (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 240. Burkett interprets Qur'an 4:157-158, "That is to say, it [the Qur'an] upholds a crucifixion, but a 'semblance,' rather than Jesus, was its victim." Also see Georges Anawati, "ISA," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 1986, 525. According to Anawati, Muhammad rejected the crucifixion of 'Īsā and affirmed his ascension "in a birth-body, not a glorified body."

¹⁰⁷ Ibn Kathīr, *The Islamic View of Jesus*, 88-89. Ibn Kathīr says Jesus asked one of his disciples to take his place and then an opening in the ceiling occurred and Jesus was taken up to heaven while his disciple was crucified in his place. Also see Todd Lawson, *The Crucifixion and the Qur'an: A Study in the History of Muslim Thought* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2009), 2-3; Lawson says, "But, as will be seen in the following pages, any number of readers - Muslim or not - could read the same verse [Q; 4:157] without coming to that conclusion [that they did not crucify him]." This will be discussed later regarding Ataie's interpretation of the crucifixion of Christ. Also see Marcia Hermansen, "Eschatology," *The Cambridge Companion to Classical Islamic Theology*. Cambridge Companions to Religion, Winter, T. J., ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 317. Hermansen says, "Muslim rejections of the crucifixion arise both from the fact that since there is no original sin, redemption is neither necessary nor possible, and the fact that as the 'Messiah' Jesus would not be killed by his opponents (Qur'an 4: 157)." Also see David Marshall, *Learning from How Muslims See Christianity* (Cambridge: Grove Books, 2006), 7. Marshall says Muslims believe that Jesus did not die because God raised him alive to heaven and nobody can atone for someone else's sins. The last part of Marshall's statement will be relevant later when Ataie suggests Jesus died for the "transgressions" of Israel.

¹⁰⁸ Küng, *Islam*, 499. Küng says, "The Qur'ān seems to think in terms of a natural death [not on the cross] for Jesus and his resurrection to life... the crucifixion is an undeniable historical event, [but] the 'crucifixion' spoken of in the Qur'ān, denied by the Qur'ān, is a theological event, that it is impossible to crucify/kill/destroy God's word ... which is eternally victorious."

who do not believe the message his prophet has brought is either to destroy them or to move his prophet elsewhere.¹⁰⁹ ʿĪsā was raised up to God, moved elsewhere, when the people did not heed his message.

Islam offers an eschatological narrative in which ʿĪsā has a major role. Al-Bukhārī records a tradition in which ʿĪsā will descend among the Muslim people as a just ruler and “will break the Cross and kill the pig and abolish the Jizya (a tax taken from non-Muslims, who are under the protection of the Muslim government).”¹¹⁰ Muḥammad ibn ʿAbd Allāh al-Kisāʿī (11th century CE) said, “[ʿĪsā] will remain alive in heaven until God will give him permission to descend to wage war against the Antichrist, whom he will slay ... then he will fill the earth with justice ... and marry a woman from among the Arabs who will give birth to a child, who will perform the pilgrimage, and will live a long life [40 years] before dying.”¹¹¹ Hadīth sources provide a synopsis of the return of ʿĪsā: The Mahdī will appear before ʿĪsā who descends to kill the Dajjāl who opposes them [The Mahdī and ʿĪsā are two separate people by this view]; after this, the Mahdī will ask ʿĪsā to lead the prayer but he will refuse and allow the Mahdī this honor; ʿĪsā will then remain upon the earth, not as a prophet, but as the leader of all the Muslims, and many non-Muslims will accept ʿĪsā as a

¹⁰⁹ Leaman, “ISA,” 306. Leaman says, “For example, Ibrahim (Abraham) migrated from Iraq and sought refuge in Syria. Similarly, Musa (Moses) migrated from Egypt and came to Madyan. Finally, the Last Prophet, Muhammad, migrated from Mecca and came to Medina. It was from there that he finally attacked Mecca and conquered it.”

¹¹⁰ Al-Bukhārī 3:34:425.

¹¹¹ Muḥammad ibn ʿAbd Allāh al-Kisāʿī, *Tales of the Prophets: Qiṣaṣ al-Anbiyāʾ* (Chicago: KAZI Publications, 1997), 334.

servant of Allah; lastly ʿĪsā will remain on the earth for forty years after which he will die and be buried.¹¹² Another figure is introduced in the narrative above, the Mahdī, who appears to be distinct from ʿĪsā. However, there are differing views on the Mahdī's identity, and some believe ʿĪsā and the Mahdī to be one and the same.¹¹³ Because ʿĪsā refuses to allow the Mahdī in Jerusalem to yield authority to him, and instead worships beside him, some believe the Mahdī to be another person who will rule over the world with ʿĪsā at his side.

A formative-classical understanding of *nuzūl* ʿĪsā can be summarized from the narratives above: ʿĪsā will descend from God and, alongside the Mahdī, secure a world peace. To accomplish this the Dajjāl and all who oppose the message of ʿĪsā must be killed.¹¹⁴ A worldwide peace will follow under the rule of the Mahdī and ʿĪsā, and

¹¹² Muhammad Hisham Kabbani, *The Approach of Armageddon?* 2nd edition (Washington, DC: Islamic Supreme Council of America, 2003), 235-238. Also see Muslim, "Kitāb al-Fitan" #2897, #2901a, #2937a, and Muslim, "Kitāb al-Īmān," #157. *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim* is a 9th-century hadith collection compiled by Persian scholar Muslim ibn al-Hajjāj (d. 875 CE). Also see al-Suyūṭī, *Jami' al-Saghīr*, (5:265). Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī (d. 1505 CE) was one of the most prolific writers of the Middle Ages who authored works in virtually every Islamic science.

¹¹³ Gabriel Said Reynolds, "Jesus, the Qā'im and the End of the World," *Rivista Degli Studi Orientali* 75, no. 1/4 (2001): 55–86. Reynolds says that Sunnī Islam has three separate views of the Mahdī: He is a political leader, a messianic figure who will gather Muslims under one rule before the descent of Jesus, and he is none other than Jesus himself (62-64). Shi'a Islam accepts everything about Jesus as Sunnī Islam except his eschatological role. The key figure in Shi'a eschatology is the Qā'im or Mahdī who will come to avenge Islam and Jesus' only role will be to pray behind him after his descent and remain a pious ascetic (82-85). For the Shi'a, the Mahdī and Jesus are distinct.

¹¹⁴ Ibn Kathīr, *The Islamic View of Jesus*, 93. Also see Zeki Saritoprak, "The Legend of al-Dajjal (Antichrist): The Personification of Evil in the Islamic Tradition." *The Muslim World* 93, no. April (2003): 304. Saritoprak says, "The Antichrist [Dajjāl] is a devil to some, a human with supernatural powers to others, and to still others, a movement or regime of disbelief."

opinions differ on whether these are distinct persons, and if distinct, who will have the greater authority.

Shi'a understandings of 'Īsā do not differ greatly from those presented, but there are some notable exceptions. Because the Shi'as merge religious and political authority in the person of the Imām, their understandings of 'Īsā are put in a slightly different theological perspective. Imāms in Shi'a Islam are divinely chosen and considered mediators between God and man, lights to the world, sinless men with a divine commission and authority to rule.¹¹⁵ They are often given esoteric knowledge by God to transmit to his disciples. The substitution ideas regarding 'Īsā's escape from crucifixion are embraced by Shi'as because they believe similar things could happen to their Imāms or saints.¹¹⁶ For this reason, Shi'as appreciate 'Īsā but suggest that when he returns his role will be subordinate to the Mahdī.¹¹⁷ According to Sunnī understandings, 'Īsā is either the Mahdī or a partner to the Mahdī. Shi'a understandings make him only a partner and they appear at the same time.¹¹⁸ Perhaps the greatest identity the Shi'as have with 'Īsā is

¹¹⁵ Moojan Momen, *An Introduction to Shi'i Islam: The History and Doctrines of Twelver Shi'ism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 154-155.

¹¹⁶ Khalidi, *The Muslim Jesus*, 39. Khalidi says, "Some second/eighth-century Shi'ite groups, for instance, argued that just as Jesus in the Qur'an was made to ascend to God, so also their imams were not dead but invisible." Also see Robinson, *Christ in Islam and Christianity*, 176. Also see Leirvik, *Images of Jesus Christ in Islam*, 78.

¹¹⁷ Reynolds, "Jesus, the Qā'im and the End of the World," 82-85. The key figure in Shi'a eschatology is the Qā'im or Mahdī who will come to avenge Islam and Jesus' only role will be to pray behind him after his descent and remain a pious ascetic. Also see Robinson, *Christ in Islam and Christianity*, 176.

¹¹⁸ Jalal al-Din al-Sagheer, *Signs of al-Mahdi's Reappearance*, edited by Yasin al-Jibouri (North Charleston: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2017), 60. Also see Saritoprak, "The Legend of al-Dajjal (Antichrist): The Personification of Evil in the Islamic Tradition," 299. Saritoprak says, "According to some

his image as a suffering servant. The history of the Shi'a sect is born in suffering with the defeat of Husayn at Karbala (680 CE) and his subsequent martyrdom. For Shi'as, suffering has been a major force in human history.¹¹⁹ Husayn's death was pivotal in shaping Islamic and Shi'a history.

Sufi understandings also offer additional insights into 'Īsā. Sufism is characterized as a "mystical, inwardly directed movement, often regarded as a reaction against dry legalism and worldliness in Islam."¹²⁰ Others would say that Sufism is an attempt to understand the ways of God in order to become more knowledgeable about Him.¹²¹ 'Īsā is a role model for the Sufis because they desire a union with God, like 'Īsā enjoyed, and asceticism is often their path to this transformed state.¹²² Al-Muhāsibī (d. 857 CE) taught his students with sayings that closely resembled the Sermon on the Mount as taught by the Jesus of the Gospels.¹²³ There are many other attributes of the Sufi 'Īsā that are of

Shi'ite sources, the Mahdi, a very significant figure in the Shi'ite tradition, will kill the Antichrist [Dajjāl] with the help of Jesus, while in the Sunni tradition, this role belongs solely to Jesus."

¹¹⁹ Mahmoud M. Ayoub, "Towards an Islamic Christology, II: The Death of Jesus, Reality or Delusion." *The Muslim World* 70, no. 2 (1980), 116.

¹²⁰ Leirvik, *Images of Jesus Christ in Islam*, 83.

¹²¹ Zeki Saritoprak, *Islamic Spirituality: Theology and Practice for the Modern World* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), 19.

¹²² Christopher Melchert, "Origins and Early Sufism," in *The Cambridge Companion to Sufism*, Cambridge Companions to Religion, Ridgeon, Lloyd V. J., ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 3. Melchert says, "In the mid-ninth century [there arose] a mystical trend, identified in Iraq with persons called Sufis, and they talked of reciprocal love between themselves and God, and found that God addressed them through things of the world."

¹²³ Cragg, *Jesus and the Muslim: An Exploration* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1999), 49-50. According to Cragg, "Al-Muhāsibī was a ninth century CE Muslim moralist whose *Kitāb al-Waṣāyā* (*The Book of Commandments*) is one of the most searching scrutinies of the soul, a work that comes as close as any in Islam to the temper of the Sermon on the Mount."

interest. Ibn ‘Arabī (d. 1240 CE) said ‘Īsā is transcendent in that he is at the same time “the Spirit of God and the Slave of God.”¹²⁴ Leirvik says Jalāl al-dīn Rūmī (d. 1273 CE) said of ‘Īsā:

[He is] an absolutely extraordinary individual, embodying perfect humanity in being absorbed in essential unity with the divine. As a spirit from the Divine Spirit, and as a fully integrated personality, Jesus stands beyond the sects and creeds. He is “unicoloured”, “as simple and one-coloured as light.”¹²⁵

It has been argued that Rūmī goes well beyond what we would normally identify as “Islamic norms” when it comes to the person of ‘Īsā, but Rūmī never allows ‘Īsā to go beyond the Islamic maxim that there is no god but God.¹²⁶

A helpful description of the Jesus of formative-classical Islam is that he is a “trustee of an inheritance not a relative of the testator.”¹²⁷ The Muslim narrative is that God has sent his prophets repeatedly to the earth to bring a message, and sometimes a book to warn or instruct his people. ‘Īsā is the penultimate prophet to Muhammad, who said of ‘Īsā, “I am the nearest of all the people to the son of Mary ... there has been no prophet between me and him (‘Īsā).”¹²⁸ ‘Īsā is one of many prophets sent to bring mankind into submission to Allah. He is given the ability to perform miraculous deeds

¹²⁴ Ibn ‘Arabī, *The Bezels of Wisdom*, Translated by R. W. J. Austin, The Classics of Western Spirituality (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), 178.

¹²⁵ Leirvik, *Images of Jesus Christ in Islam*, 92. Also see Jalāluddīn Rūmī, *The Mathnawi of Jalaluddin Rumi*, Translated by Reynold A. Nicholson, Vol. I. 8 vols. (London: Messrs Luzak & Company, 1926), I:500-504.

¹²⁶ J. R. King, ‘Jesus and Joseph in Rūmī’s Mathnawī,’ *The Muslim World*, LXXX, no. 2, 89. Also see Leirvik, *Images of Jesus Christ in Islam*, 94.

¹²⁷ Khalidi, *The Muslim Jesus*, 17.

¹²⁸ Al-Bukhārī 4:55:651.

from God and wisdom for teaching. His book, or Gospel, was to warn mankind against idolatry and polytheism while foretelling the coming of Ahmad, Muhammad, who would ultimately begin to set all things right. 'Īsā was therefore a “trustee of an inheritance,” the penultimate prophet in a long prophetic line. 'Īsā's warning against “idolatry and polytheism” was directly aimed at those who would suggest that he was a “relative of the testator”; a progeny of Allah or “son” in any biological or divine sense.

Balic offers a characteristic classical portrait of Jesus which I paraphrase: In Islam Jesus is reduced to human dimensions. [He] did come “as the promised messiah of the Jews, but he failed to fulfill his role in the expected way.” Christ repeatedly referred to himself as the Son of Man, “[this can be interpreted as] he ate as all other men do ... a delicate way of describing the human situation.” “Islam recognizes Jesus neither as God nor as Son of God. He was merely ... an Israelite messenger of salvation (apostle of God) to whom a particular book, namely the Gospel [*Injīl*] was given.” The title of *al-Masīh*, [given to him in the Qur'an], “is to be understood only as a title or an address, no further importance should be attached to it.”¹²⁹ This Jesus of Islam “failed to fulfill his role in the expected way” and Ibn Kathīr affirms this depiction, “The point is that when 'Eesa established the evidences and proofs against his people, most of them persisted in their disbelief and stubbornness.”¹³⁰ This description of the Jesus of Islam does not venerate

¹²⁹ Balic, “The Image of Jesus in Contemporary Islamic Theology,” 2-7.

¹³⁰ Ibn Kathīr, *Stories of the Prophets*, 576.

him beyond any other prophet of Islam. Will the primary source authors continue this pattern, or will their understandings venerate the Jesus of Islam differently? Balic's understanding, and the understandings of the Jesus of Islam articulated in this section, will underpin the formative-classical understanding used to identify and measure variations of contemporary American Muslim scholars' understandings in later chapters.

1.2 Developments in Understandings of the Jesus of Islam, 8th - 18th Centuries CE, according to Tarif Khalidi's *The Muslim Jesus*

Khalidi's *The Muslim Jesus* is a collection of sayings and stories—303 in number—of Jesus in Arabic Islamic literature from the 2nd- 12th centuries AH (8th – 18th centuries CE).¹³¹ It is important to examine Khalidi's statement that the Jesus of Islam is advancing and identify the evolution he observed through his collected sayings as this may prove to be a bridge to understandings that emerge in the writings and teachings of contemporary American Muslim scholars to follow. Below I summarize the evolution of 'Īsā within the Islamic tradition as observed by Khalidi.

There is little evolution in the person of 'Īsā in the second Islamic century AH as most of the sayings recalled by Khalidi recast the Gospel Jesus into his Qur'anic image and "cleanse" him from any misinterpretation by his followers.¹³² Khalidi's Muslim Jesus evolves from the Qur'anic Jesus through more than one hundred sayings from ten

¹³¹ Khalidi, *The Muslim Jesus*, 45.

¹³² *Ibid*, 65.

sources in the third Islamic century AH. Jesus becomes a “spiritual guide (*imam*) of the poor” singling him out from all the other prophets.¹³³ He is the ideal ascetic, going far beyond the Qur’anic depiction of him and as a devoted ascetic, Jesus became the ultimate friend to the poor. Many of the sayings in this century related to Jesus giving special attention to the poor and exhorting the community to embrace them as a communal responsibility.

As a spiritual guide, the Muslim Jesus became a prophet of wisdom, a speaker of proverbs, and one who received divine revelation. In many instances, stories (or parables) from the Gospels are re-envisioned by early Muslims and clearly explained for their moral teaching. Khalidi says, “God privileges the Islamic community, with Jesus acting as witness.”¹³⁴ As a sage from God, the Muslim Jesus attacked intellectuals who knew much about the sayings of God but did not do what the sayings required. Khalidi suggests that it is in this century that the Muslim Jesus came to be known as “the prophet of the heart.”¹³⁵ Devoted ascetic, champion of the poor, conscience of the intellectuals, God’s voice to the Islamic community, gifted sage, prophet of the heart, this is the Muslim Jesus that emerges from the third Islamic century.

The fourth century AH sayings do not undermine previous understandings but add new dimensions to the Muslim Jesus. Jesus is not only one who received God’s revelation

¹³³ Ibid, 74.

¹³⁴ Khalidi, *The Muslim Jesus*, 100.

¹³⁵ Ibid, 113.

and repeated it accurately with explanation, but he became a lord of nature. A common view of the Qur'an and the people of this age was that every prophet sent by God was given some special skill to demonstrate their office of prophethood, and Jesus' skill was physician and healer.¹³⁶ The Brethren of Purity (*Ikhwān al-Ṣafā*, 10th century CE) provides a saying where Jesus claims to have been sent not just to cure people from physical ailments, but also from "sickness of corrupt beliefs, wicked conduct, and evil works," and he addressed God as "Father" suggesting He is the Father of all who will be raised to the Kingdom of Heaven.¹³⁷ This is the first occurrence of God as "Father" in *The Muslim Jesus*. This creates tension with the Qur'anic teaching of the transcendence of God which never refers to God as "Father" of any man or woman. Khalidi presents these sayings, fully aware of their associated tensions, as contributing to the evolution of the Muslim Jesus.

The fifth and sixth Islamic centuries AH brought further developments in the portrayal of the Muslim Jesus. The sayings attributed to writers in this century presented Jesus as one who moved God to reveal His thoughts and interceded for the dead.¹³⁸ Abū Hāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 1111 CE), a Sufi, had an interest in Jesus because, according to

¹³⁶ Ibid, 137.

¹³⁷ Ikhwān al-Ṣafā, *Rasā'il*, 4:172; as cited in Khalidi, *The Muslim Jesus*, 143-144.

¹³⁸ Abū Sa'd al-Kharkūshī, unpublished manuscript; as cited in Khalidi, *The Muslim Jesus*, 149. A story is recorded by al-Kharkūshī (d. 1015 CE) that Jesus once passed a man who was suffering and asked God to relieve his pain. God replied by revealing the reason for the man's suffering and teaching that we should have patience in our suffering because God may have great purpose for us, to purge our souls. Also see Abū Nu'aym al-Iṣfahānī, *Hilyat al-Awliya'* 6:10-12; as cited in Khalidi, *The Muslim Jesus*, 154-157. Here is an example of God revealing his thoughts to Jesus in a saying by al-Iṣfahānī (d. 1038 CE). God not only answered Jesus' request for revelation but allowed him to speak to a skeleton, who had been a woman in life, and resurrect the woman, "by God's leave," who lived another twelve years and died a true believer.

Khalidi, he saw him as a “Prophet of the Heart.”¹³⁹ Al-Ghazālī’s Jesus was the consummate Sufi who taught one to reject the world and its pleasures in pursuit of contentment with God. He was the perfect blend of humility and wisdom. Sufis were about pursuit of some secret knowledge or wisdom that would commend them to God. Jesus is a revealer of this special wisdom from God and, according to al-Ghazālī, he is like no other prophet in that his “speech is a mention [of God], whose silence is contemplation [of God], and whose every glance derives a lesson [from God].”¹⁴⁰ This Jesus is not only a revealer of God and His ways, but God seems to do his bidding. According to al-Ghazālī, when Jesus passed a man working with a shovel, Jesus asked God to perform several deeds for the man, which God did without dialogue or qualification.¹⁴¹

The seventh through the twelfth Islamic centuries AH offer additional sayings demonstrating continued evolution of the Muslim Jesus. Among these is a saying that implies Jesus asserted the truth of his own crucifixion.¹⁴² There are sayings demonstrating that Jesus did not have to ask God’s permission to resurrect people because there is no dialogue between him and God beforehand, and God seems to have

¹³⁹ Khalidi, *The Muslim Jesus*, 164.

¹⁴⁰ Abū Hāmid al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyā’ ‘Ulūm al-Dīn*, 4:411; as cited in Khalidi, *The Muslim Jesus*, 180.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid*, 4:438; as cited in Khalidi, *The Muslim Jesus*, 180.

¹⁴² Jamāl al-Dīn ibn Wāṣil (d. 1298 CE), *Mufarrij al-Kurūb*, 1:248; as cited in Khalidi, *The Muslim Jesus*, 205. The saying is “Al-‘Uris saw in his sleep Christ Jesus Son of Mary, who seemed to turn his face toward him from heaven. Al-‘Uris asked him, ‘Did the crucifixion really happen?’ Jesus said, ‘Yes, the crucifixion really happened.’”

given him blanket permission to resurrect whom he will.¹⁴³ Jesus also interrogated natural objects and animals in nature.¹⁴⁴ A saying from the twelfth century implied Jesus had power over Satan's influence on Muslims. In a conversation with Satan, Jesus impressed him with his asceticism and Satan vowed never to advise a Muslim again.¹⁴⁵

Khalidi admits that the Muslim Jesus portrayed by the sayings collected in *The Muslim Jesus* strains formative-classical understandings of the Qur'anic Jesus. He says, "Though he [the Muslim Jesus] is a Muslim creation, once created, he maintains a distance from the strict orthodoxy of his creators."¹⁴⁶ Khalidi's view is that the Muslim Jesus was sustained within the cultures of Judaism and Christianity but restored by Islam. After being cleansed from his Christian Christology, the Muslim Jesus evolves and is endowed with "attributes that render him meta-historical and even, so to speak, meta-religious... he ceases to be an argument and becomes a living and vital moral voice, demanding to be heard."¹⁴⁷ Khalidi's Jesus advances from an "argument" against the divine claims of the Jesus of the Gospels to a person one can admire and emulate as one examines Muslim sayings through the centuries. These advances are summarized in the conclusions below.

¹⁴³ Kamāl al-Dīn al-Damīrī (d. 1405 CE), *Hayāt al-Hayawān al-Kubrā*, 1:202-203; as cited in Khalidi, *The Muslim Jesus*, 208.

¹⁴⁴ Khalidi, *The Muslim Jesus*, 210.

¹⁴⁵ Al-Murtaḍā al-Husaynī al-Zabīdī (d. 1791 CE), *Itḥāf al-Sadāh al-Muttaqīn*, 7:445; as cited in Khalidi, *The Muslim Jesus*, 217.

¹⁴⁶ Khalidi, *The Muslim Jesus*, 44.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid*, 45.

1.3 Conclusions

Chapter 1.1 assembles a broad framework for formative-classical understandings of the Jesus of Islam to serve as a reference from which to assess shifts in the primary source authors' understandings. Elements of this understanding that lack scholarly unanimity are notable because their ambiguities offer opportunities for new understandings from the authors' texts. Some examples include: The sense in which 'Īsā is the "Word of God," the *Injīl* of 'Īsā being a lost work or existing in the four Gospels of the New Testament, the manner and timing of the death of 'Īsā, and the timing and events surrounding the Second Coming of 'Īsā. These topics will be discussed in the following chapters using the authors' understandings.

Khalidi believes his collected sayings demonstrate advances in understandings of the Muslim Jesus. I identified the advances according to Khalidi: Spiritual guide of the poor, ideal ascetic, prophet of wisdom, speaker of proverbs, one who received divine revelation, prophet of the heart, lord of nature, master physician, one who called God "Father," revealer of God's secrets and thoughts, intercessor for the dead, resurrector of the dead – always by God's leave – but without the need to request God's permission, and one who had power over Satan. This study of contemporary Muslim authors writing to the American public will explore to what extent and in what ways the Jesus of Islam is evolving. Whether the primary sources will build on the Qur'anic and Muslim Jesus understandings or take a new direction will be determined in the chapters to follow.

Part II - Contemporary Muslims Writing to the American Public about the Jesus of Islam

Muslim authors will be introduced who have been selected as primary sources because they have authored works in the past ten years in an American context on the Jesus of Islam. I position these authors as writing “in an American context” because all reside in America and four are professors in American universities. If they are not professors, they have significant linkages to American academic and professional institutions that give them visibility to and influence with American Muslims. It is not possible to quantify the degree of influence these authors have upon American Muslims, so that was not a criterion. What is relevant is that they are writing about the Jesus of Islam as an American Muslim or to American Muslims. In this light, their views are intrinsically important no matter the influence they may have with American Muslims. Other specifics regarding these authors’ “American context” are in their introductions in the chapters that follow. Other works by these authors were listed above in “Methods/Research Approach.” These works, while not directly relevant to this research, demonstrate the presence these authors have in an American context through their publications.

Two of the primary sources, Ataie and Harpci, provide theses that are easily accessed by the American public as well as other publications and videos through their

academic institutions.¹⁴⁸ Not required, but desirable, are authors representing the various understandings of dominant groups of Islam in America; Sunnī, Shi’a, Sufi, and liberal/progressive Muslims. Ataie and Saritoprak are Sunnī. Harpci does not self-identify as Sunnī, but his writings reflect Sunnī understandings. Al-Jibouri is Shi’a, Aslan is Sufi, and Akyol is a liberal Muslim.¹⁴⁹ This variety in Muslim branches represented by the primary sources should provide a broad-ranging view of contemporary understandings of the Jesus of Islam.

More than ten years after Khalidi’s *The Muslim Jesus*, Aslan addresses the Jesus of Islam in an American context. Aslan also appears to have been a catalyst for several follow-on works. Aslan published *Zealot: The Life and Time of Jesus of Nazareth* in 2013. Aslan reconstructs, or he might prefer the word “reclaims,” a Jesus that is a considerable departure from both ʿĪsā of formative-classical Islam and the Jesus of the Gospels.¹⁵⁰ While Aslan does not reference Khalidi, he does offer a changing Jesus of Islam in line with Khalidi’s observations. But the Jesus Aslan presents is a departure from formative-classical understandings and conflicts with those interpretations regarding miracles, virgin birth, and death by crucifixion.

¹⁴⁸ Fatih Harpci, *Muhammad Speaking of the Messiah: Jesus in the Hadith Tradition*, 2013. Ali J. Ataie, *Authenticating the Johannine Injil: Sunnite ‘Polemirenic’ Interpretive Methodological Approaches to the Gospel of John*, 2023.

¹⁴⁹ Mustafa Akyol, “Mustafa Akyol CV,” n.d. <http://mustafaakyol.org/images/downloads/mustafa-akyol-cv-2017.pdf>

¹⁵⁰ Aslan, *Zealot*, xxx.

After the publication of *Zealot*, five other works were authored on the Jesus of Islam by the authors. Two of these are theses and the authors, Ataie and Harpci, are active in American academic institutions producing videos and literature to complement their theses and other writings.¹⁵¹ Three of the primary sources reference Aslan's work as a catalyst for their writing; supporting the observation that Aslan began an exchange of ideas amongst Muslim authors about the Jesus of Islam.

The first to write after Aslan was Harpci. His PhD thesis, *Muhammad Speaking of the Messiah: Jesus in the Hadith Tradition*, written in 2013 examines hadith reports of Prophet Muhammad's words about and attitudes toward Jesus. Harpci's thesis is a strong affirmation of formative-classical understandings of 'Īsā making one wonder why he felt it necessary to exegete the Qur'an and Hadith texts regarding 'Īsā to an American Muslim public. This will be addressed later in the thesis.

In 2014, al-Jibouri wrote *Mary and Jesus in Islam*, which he says was written to convince others to embrace the Islamic faith.¹⁵² His use of Mary and Jesus in Islam to draw the American public into the Islamic faith is interesting and challenges the formative-classical understandings of both, which will be discussed. In the same year Saritoprak authored *Islam's Jesus*. A scholar of Islamic eschatology, Saritoprak sees 'Īsā as the ultimate hope for Islam and the world.

¹⁵¹ Fatih Harpci is Associate Professor of Religion at Carthage College in Kenosha, Wisconsin. Ali Ataie has a video series on "The Prophet Jesus" and is professor of Arabic, Qur'an, and Comparative Theologies at Zaytuna College. <https://lamppostedu.org/lessons-from-the-life-of-prophet-jesus-ustadh-ali-ataie>

¹⁵² Al-Jibouri, *Mary and Jesus in Islam*, 181.

In 2016, Ataie, a Sunnī, authored his thesis, *Authenticating the Johannine Injil: Sunnite 'Polemirenic' Interpretive Methodological Approaches to the Gospel of John*. His thesis accepts the text of the Gospel of John “*a priori* deeming it to be the very Injīl referenced time and again in the Qur’an.”¹⁵³ Both the Synoptic Gospels and the book of John represent the *Injīl* according to Ataie.¹⁵⁴

The next year, Akyol wrote *The Islamic Jesus: How the King of the Jews Became a Prophet of the Muslims*. Akyol referenced Aslan’s work, affirming his understandings of the culture and actions of Jesus, but remaining neutral on Aslan’s historical Jesus understandings.¹⁵⁵ Akyol sees ʿĪsā as a prophet for this time for Muslims, Christians, and Jews. A burst of literature by Muslim authors writing to the American public on the Jesus of Islam began in 2013 with Aslan’s *Zealot*. Aslan precipitated an exchange of ideas encouraging at least three or more Muslim authors to publish their understandings of the Jesus of Islam.

Chapters 2-4 will introduce the six primary sources and provide information and analysis relating to an author’s critics, key influencers, or presuppositions. The findings and conclusions derived from the authors’ understandings of the Jesus of Islam will be discussed in Chapters 5-10. A discussion of each author’s perceived shift from formative-classical understandings will also be offered in Chapter 10. These will be based on the

¹⁵³ Ataie, *Authenticating the Johannine Injil*, 126.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ Akyol, *The Islamic Jesus*, 19, 222-227.

totality of the primary source texts, especially statements used in the analysis of Chapters 5-9.

The authors will be introduced as follows: Chapter 2 will introduce Aslan because he offers the greatest departure from formative-classical understandings and may also have been a catalyst for the exchange of ideas that follow in the other primary source texts. The remaining authors will be introduced according to their departure from formative-classical understandings, lowest to highest. Chapter 2 will also introduce Harpci. Chapter 3 will introduce al-Jibouri and Saritoprak and Chapter 4 will introduce Ataie and Akyol.

Chapter 2 - Aslan and Harpci

2.1 Reza Aslan

Aslan is a Sufi Muslim and Professor of Creative Writing at the University of California, Riverside. An Iranian American scholar of religious studies, Aslan has written four books on religion including *Zealot: The Life and Time of Jesus of Nazareth* and considers himself a “genuine follower of Jesus of Nazareth” as a Muslim.¹⁵⁶ In a 2013 interview, Aslan says, “I think if the Islamic reformation is going to come to fruition in our lifetime, then it is going to be led by Muslim Americans.”¹⁵⁷ The purpose of this introduction is to introduce Aslan’s early experience with Christianity, the impact it had upon his ideas, and to identify some of Aslan’s presuppositions that affect his conclusions, specifically concerning the reliability of the Gospels, the Historical Jesus movement, and the importance of James the brother of Jesus and his writings. Some of Aslan’s critics’ objections to his ideas will also be offered and Aslan’s “Islamic reformation” and his belief that this will be led by Muslim Americans will be discussed. Lastly, Aslan’s ideas will be demonstrated to conflict with formative-classical understandings.

¹⁵⁶ Aslan, “The life of Jesus: No angel,” *The Economist*, July 27, 2013. His other books include *Beyond Fundamentalism: Confronting Religious Extremism in the Age of Globalization* (New York: Random House, 2010), *No god but God: The Origins and Evolution of Islam* (New York: Delacorte Press, 2011), and *God: A Human History* (New York: Random House, 2017). These books offer no additional insights into Aslan’s understandings of Jesus of Islam.

¹⁵⁷ Zahir Janmohamed, “Reza Aslan: An Interview,” *The Islamic Monthly*, January 1, 2006, 119.

In this introduction, unless stated otherwise, the term ‘Jesus,’ ‘historical Jesus,’ or ‘Jesus the zealot’ will refer to Aslan’s Jesus of Nazareth. Historical Jesus understandings are beyond my focus, but this school of thought suggests that Christianity in the first century held a variety of views about Jesus, and the New Testament Scriptures represent a small collection of the views that existed and competed with each other in the first century.¹⁵⁸ Because historical Jesus researchers use means other than scriptural authority to determine their understandings, they generally paint wide and diverse images of the historical person of Jesus.¹⁵⁹ Darrell Bock and Daniel Wallace say, “Many historical Jesus scholars go about a work of revising Jesus, painting a portrait distinct from the texts that the church has claimed for centuries are the best reflection of Jesus that we have.”¹⁶⁰ The term ‘historical Jesus’ implies understandings of Jesus that may differ from each other and Muslim and Christian understandings, therefore, it is Aslan’s ‘historical Jesus’ that will be defined in this introduction.

¹⁵⁸ Darrell L. Bock, and Daniel B. Wallace, *Dethroning Jesus: Exposing Popular Culture’s Quest to Unseat the Biblical Christ* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2007), 11-12. Also see the following works for authors who articulate Historical Jesus understandings: Gerd Theißen and Annette Merz, *The Historical Jesus: A Comprehensive Guide*, Translated by John Bowden (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998).; Meier, John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew, 1-5: The Roots of the Problem and the Person* (New York: Doubleday, 1991).; and Bart D. Ehrman, *How Jesus Became God: The Exaltation of a Jewish Preacher from Galilee*, First edition (New York: HarperOne, 2014).

¹⁵⁹ Osvaldo D. Vena, Larry W. Hurtado, Michael Willett Newheart, and Stephen Charles Mott, “The Historical Jesus | Massachusetts Bible Society,” Accessed August 4, 2022. <https://www.massbible.org/exploring-the-bible/ask-a-prof/answers/historical-jesus>.

¹⁶⁰ Bock and Wallace, *Dethroning Jesus*, 28.

Aslan's early experience with Christianity impacted his ideas. He was raised in a "lukewarm" Muslim family.¹⁶¹ He was exposed to Christianity around fifteen years of age and professed the Christian faith at an evangelistic event. In his words, "I was presented with a Jesus who was less 'Lord and Savior' than he was a best friend, someone with whom I could have a deep and personal relationship."¹⁶² The Jesus that Aslan wishes to make known is a "friend," not "Lord" or divine in any sense. Because he discovered "that the Bible is replete with the most blatant and obvious errors and contradictions," Aslan discarded his new faith and began a search for his historical Jesus.¹⁶³

One idea Aslan embraced after discarding his new faith is the belief that the Gospels were written after 70 C.E. by anonymous authors who sought to reimagine the Jesus of history to save the brand of Christianity that survived the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 C.E., namely Paul the Apostle's deviant teachings. Another idea is that belief in a non-divine Jesus survived in Jerusalem under the leadership of James, Jesus' brother, until Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans, which left the Pauline branch of Christianity a surviving but errant offshoot.¹⁶⁴ Aslan cannot accept Paul's Jesus because

¹⁶¹ Aslan, *Zealot*, xviii.

¹⁶² Ibid.

¹⁶³ Ibid, xix.

¹⁶⁴ Aslan, *Zealot*, 272. Aslan cites several scholars to support this conclusion to include Gerd Ludemann in his works *Paul: The Founder of Christianity* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2002), especially pages 69 and 120; and, with M. Eugene Boring, *Opposition to Paul in Jewish Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989); Tabor, *Paul and Jesus*, 19; and J.D.G. Dunn, "Echoes of the Intra-Jewish Polemic in Paul's Letter to the Galatians," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 112/3 (1993), 459–77. Also see Bruce Chilton and Jacob Neusner, eds. *The Brother of Jesus: James the Just and His Mission*. 1st edition (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 10-65; see John Painter's essay "Who was James? Footprints as a Means of

he is too deviant from the Jewish messianic movements of the time to have been acceptable to the Jews; according to Aslan, Paul had to leave Jerusalem and go to places like Antioch and Rome to teach his radical thoughts and this gave birth to the Christianity that has survived until today.¹⁶⁵ Aslan does not say where he obtained this understanding, that Paul corrupted the true teachings of Jesus, but it was articulated by Qāḍī ‘Abd al-Jabbār (d. 1025 CE) who argued that the true *Injīl* was written in Hebrew and the fact that the Gospels are written in Greek demonstrates that Paul and the other apostles “changed the language [to Greek] so that the party of knowledge [faithful Jews] would not understand their teachings and their intention to cover up their lies” and went to places like Rome where the Hebrew Scriptures were unknown to propagate their truths.¹⁶⁶

Aslan also contends that Jesus was just another of many self-proclaimed messiahs who sought to re-establish the Davidic throne in Jerusalem and throw off the yoke of Roman oppression. His historical Jesus failed in his mission but left an example for many to follow, i.e., standing firm amid overwhelming odds. While Aslan finds this Jesus attractive and realistic, he believes the Christians surviving the destruction of Jerusalem could not tolerate their founder being so humiliated and proceeded to rewrite his history

Identification.” Aslan references Painter’s essay frequently regarding James’ role in the church in Jerusalem.

¹⁶⁵ Aslan, *Zealot*, 215-16.

¹⁶⁶ Gabriel Said Reynolds, *A Muslim Theologian in a Sectarian Milieu: ‘Abd al-Jabbār and the Critique of Christian Origins*, *Islamic History and Civilization: Studies and Texts*, v. 56 (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 93-94.

and teachings to make him a victor despite his ignominious death. The unreliability of the Gospels, the importance of James to the early Christian church in Jerusalem, and Aslan's historical Jesus who was just another failed Messiah are ideas that Aslan developed after discarding his Christian faith. These ideas are important to understanding Aslan's Jesus, and it will be demonstrated that some of Aslan's understandings conflict with both Muslim and Christian norms.

Aslan's presupposition regarding the reliability of the Gospels shapes his understandings of the Jesus of Islam. He believes the Gospels were written long after 70 C.E. by anonymous authors to refashion Jesus into the Jesus of the Gospels.¹⁶⁷ This late authorship, according to Aslan, allowed the Christians who had escaped the destruction of Jerusalem (70 C.E.) the opportunity to reshape the historical Jesus. The dating of the Gospels is outside my focus and an ongoing discussion; some scholars would agree with Aslan, others argue that most, if not all, of the Gospels can be dated earlier than 70 C.E.¹⁶⁸ Aslan does not address the range of possible dating for the Gospels but simply affirms the

¹⁶⁷ Aslan, *Zealot*, xxvi. Aslan dates the Gospels as follows: Mark was written "at least four decades after Jesus' death" which would be after 70 C.E.; Matthew and Luke were probably written at least two decades later around 90 to 100 C.E.; and John was written as late as 120 C.E.

¹⁶⁸ There are scholars who support Aslan's dating of the Gospels, see Bart D. Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 41. Ehrman says, "In addition, most historians think that Mark was the first of our Gospels to be written, sometime between the mid 60s to early 70s. Matthew and Luke were probably produced some ten or fifteen years later, perhaps around 80 or 85. John was written perhaps ten years after that, in 90 or 95." Also see Craig L. Blomberg, *Historical Reliability of the Gospels* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1987), 25-26. Craig Blomberg, who builds on the work of Frederick F. Bruce, dates the book of Mark at 64-68 C.E., Matthew in the mid 60's and maybe as early as 50's C.E., Luke no later than 62 C.E., and John in the 90's but suggests that some date this as early as the 60's C.E. as well.

later dating which shapes his conclusions. The Jesus that emerges in *Zealot* is a zealous revolutionary, one of many in his day, who was caught up in the religious and political turmoil of his culture and bore little resemblance to the “gentle shepherd cultivated by the early Christian community” nor did he have any claim to divinity.¹⁶⁹

Aslan believes his historical Jesus, while just another failed Messiah, is a person worth reclaiming. Aslan closes *Zealot* with this assessment, “The historical Jesus ... Jesus of Nazareth — Jesus the *man* — is every bit as compelling, charismatic, and praiseworthy as Jesus the Christ. He is, in short, someone worth believing in.”¹⁷⁰ John P. Meier shaped Aslan’s historical Jesus understandings.¹⁷¹ Aslan says of Meier, “It was his definitive look at the historical Jesus, which at the time existed only in its first volume, that planted the seeds of the present book in my mind.”¹⁷² Aslan specifically cites Meier’s work regarding Nazareth as the place of Jesus’ birth, Jesus’ demonstration of having had a formal education, the uniqueness of a Jewish man being referred to as a mother’s son (implying the absence or death of Joseph), and the desire of the first-generation Christian church to define Jesus according to their own needs.¹⁷³ Aslan disagrees with Meier on the meaning of the term “Kingdom of God”: Meier argues that this could have both a present

¹⁶⁹ Aslan, *Zealot*, xxviii.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid*, 216.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid*, 219. Aslan refers to John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus, vols. I–IV* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991–2009) for his understanding of the term “historical Jesus.”

¹⁷² *Ibid*.

¹⁷³ *Ibid*, 226, 229–30, 231.

and an eschatological meaning, while Aslan only interprets this to be in the present, which, he asserts, is why his words were a threat to Rome and ultimately contributed to his execution.¹⁷⁴ David Gowler says of Meier's book, "This 'halakic' historical Jesus did not dispense Christian moral theology or ethics, and in many ways he is not directly relevant or even pleasing to modern Christians."¹⁷⁵ I will discuss in Chapter 8 that Aslan's Jesus is also unacceptable to many Muslims and represents a significant departure from formative-classical understandings.

S. G. F. Brandon's *Jesus and the Zealots* also influenced Aslan's understandings. Aslan refers to the incident of Jesus overturning the money changers tables in the temple as the "cleansing of the Temple."¹⁷⁶ Aslan says that Brandon makes a "brilliant argument" that the temple authorities and the government of Rome were so intertwined that an attack on one was an attack on all.¹⁷⁷ Brandon says, "An attack on this [temple] business, was tantamount to an attack on the property and authority of the [Roman] magistrates."¹⁷⁸ Brandon's conclusion is, "The historical Jesus chose a Zealot for an apostle [Judas] and died crucified between two men, probably Jewish resistance fighters,

¹⁷⁴ Ibid, 249, xxix.

¹⁷⁵ David Gowler, "Book Review: A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus, Vol. 4. By John P. Meier," *Biblical Theology Bulletin: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 40 (August 1, 2010), 181–82. Also see John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*. 1st ed., (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 75.

¹⁷⁶ Aslan, *Zealot*, 238. See Matthew 21:1–22, Mark 11:1–19, Luke 19:29–48, and John 2:13–25 for the biblical account of this incident.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid, 239.

¹⁷⁸ S. G. F. Brandon, *Jesus and the Zealots* (New York: Scribner, 1967), 9.

[because he] challenged Rome's sovereignty over Israel."¹⁷⁹ This is Aslan's central premise in *Zealot*.¹⁸⁰

Aslan's Jesus was a zealous human being, with a passion for the poor, disdain for the wealthy, a love for the Mosaic law, and new teachings like the Beatitudes to expand the existing law. His Jesus was not opposed to using force to accomplish his objectives and dying for what he believed to be just.¹⁸¹ He was not detached, as Aslan perceives the Jesus of the Gospels was, from earthly kingdoms and issues. It will be demonstrated that Aslan's Jesus is a considerable departure from both 'Īsā of formative-classical Islam and the Jesus of the Gospels and presents a new and most interesting persona as interpreted by a contemporary American Muslim scholar.

Aslan's understanding of James, the brother of Jesus, was also influential in developing Aslan's ideas of Jesus. Aslan distrusts all the New Testament authors except for James. He gives James more credibility because he believes he was the leader of the Jerusalem church and is referenced in many non-canonical works as "James the Just." He cites the Palestinian Jewish Christian Hegesippus as saying, "control of the Church passed together with the Apostles, to the brother of the Lord James, whom everyone from the

¹⁷⁹ Ibid, xiv.

¹⁸⁰ Aslan, *Zealot*, xxx. Aslan says that Jesus was a "politically conscious revolutionary ... who was arrested and executed by Rome for the crime of sedition."

¹⁸¹ The Jesus of the Gospels could be described similarly but some Christians would take exception to him having "disdain" for anyone, except those who were responsible for knowing the Law and yet did not practice it or abused its intent (Matthew 23), and his use of "force to accomplish his objectives" (John 18:36).

Lord's time till our own has named the Just, for there were many Jameses, but this one was holy from his birth."¹⁸² Aslan adds, "It is unclear whether Hegesippus means that control of the church passed to the apostles and to James, or that control over the apostles also passed to James. Either way, James's leadership is affirmed."¹⁸³ James' leadership is important to Aslan because, in Aslan's opinion, James was adversarial to Paul in insisting that Jesus never taught that one should not have to obey the law, which included worshiping the one true God. When Aslan examines the letter of James, he reveals the Jesus he admires saying that James' epistle is "arguably one of the most important books in the New Testament. Because one sure way of uncovering what Jesus may have believed is to determine what his brother James believed." Aslan's implication is that James, being Jesus' half-brother, knew him better than any other person.¹⁸⁴

In James' epistle, Aslan finds echoes of the Beatitudes. He suggests that in James' condemnation of the rich (James' epistle Chapters 1, 2 and 5), "James is merely echoing the words of his brother's Beatitudes: 'Woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. Woe to you who are full, for you shall hunger. Woe to you laughing

¹⁸² Aslan, *Zealot*, 267. Aslan cites the Palestinian Jewish Christian Hegesippus (100–180 C.E.) We have access to Hegesippus's five books of early Church history only through passages cited in the third-century text of *Ecclesiastical History* by Eusebius of Caesarea (c. 260–c. 339 C.E.), a bishop of the Church under the Emperor Constantine. The quote by Hegesippus is in Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 2.23.

¹⁸³ Ibid, 269. Additional sources affirming James' authority and reputation within the early church include the *Gospel of the Hebrews* where the surname "James the Just" appears. Other documents cited by Aslan include *The Epistle of Peter*, the *Epistle of Clement*, *Ascent of James*, *Gospel of Thomas*, and *Gospel of the Hebrews* all of which refer to James using titles of authority over the Jerusalem Christians.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid, 204.

now, for soon you will mourn (Luke 6:24–25). Blessed are you who are poor, for the Kingdom of God is yours (Luke 6:20).”¹⁸⁵ Aslan’s regard for these statements supports the conclusion that the Jesus he admires is the Jesus of the Beatitudes.

Aslan is impressed by James who said, “For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it.”¹⁸⁶ Aslan finds this statement in stark disagreement with Paul’s teachings that salvation is by faith alone [in a divine Christ].¹⁸⁷ This conclusion highlights Aslan’s proclivity towards resolving apparent conflict in truth claims. Aslan seeks to relieve the tension by declaring *either* one *or* the other claim as true as opposed to considering the possibility that *both* claims could paradoxically coexist in a *both-and* relationship. Aslan does not discuss the possibility of paradox in Paul’s teaching of salvation by faith alone with James’ teaching that “faith without works is dead.”¹⁸⁸ For example, a sincere faith will exhibit works out of gratitude, and a life that demonstrates no respect for the law and righteous deeds is a life devoid of a sincere faith, therefore, faith and works could be two sides to the same coin; one could say “salvation is by faith alone,” and another, “you must demonstrate works to be saved” and both would be correct. Aslan chooses to resolve tension as an *either-or* rather than a *both-and* proposition.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid, 205.

¹⁸⁶ James 2:10.

¹⁸⁷ Romans 4:5.

¹⁸⁸ James 2:26.

Aslan appreciates James as he was an exemplification of his brother Jesus. He admires James for standing firm in the face of wrong teachings, specifically against Paul and his teachings. He believes James kept the Jerusalem Christians from following the heresy of Paul.¹⁸⁹ Unfortunately, James was killed in 62 C.E. by the high priest Ananus, not because he was defending some strange religion contrary to Jewish beliefs, but because “he was doing what he did best: defending the poor and weak against the wealthy and powerful.”¹⁹⁰ Aslan further believes that after Jerusalem and the temple were destroyed in 70 C.E. by the Roman Emperor Titus, James’ sect of followers of Jesus was destroyed and the sect that followed Paul survived to become what we know today as Christianity, believing in a divine Jesus, not Aslan and James’ historical Jesus.

The Jesus Aslan admires can be understood by examining Aslan’s admiration of James. Aslan believes that Jesus himself specified James to be his true successor.¹⁹¹ James was a devotee of the Mosaic law and in the end died for his faithfulness to this law and its emphasis on caring for the poor. Aslan cites Eusebius regarding James’ death, “So

¹⁸⁹ Aslan, *Zealot*, 272. Aslan believes the Ebionites were disciples of James, known as “the poor,” in honor of their focus on the poor. They insisted on keeping the Mosaic Law and viewed Jesus as just a man. According to Aslan, “they were one of the many heterodox communities who were marginalized and persecuted after the Council of Nicaea in 325 C.E. essentially making Pauline Christianity the orthodox religion of the Roman Empire.”

¹⁹⁰ Ibid, 212. There is general agreement among scholars that James was killed in 62 C.E. by Ananus the High Priest and Sadducee. Also see McLaren, James S. “Ananus, James, and Earliest Christianity. Josephus’ Account of the Death of James.” *The Journal of Theological Studies*, New Series, 52, no. 1 (2001): 1.

¹⁹¹ Ibid, 200. Aslan cites the *Gospel of Thomas*, usually dated somewhere between the end of the first and the beginning of the second century C.E. He says, “Jesus himself names James his successor: ‘The disciples said to Jesus, ‘We know that you will depart from us. Who will be our leader?’ Jesus said to them, ‘Where you are, you are to go to James the Just, for whose sake heaven and earth came into being’ (Gospel of Thomas, v12).”

remarkable a person must James have been, so universally esteemed for righteousness, that even the most intelligent of Jews felt this was why his martyrdom was immediately followed by the siege of Jerusalem.”¹⁹² James’ support for the poor was coupled with a condemnation of the rich. Aslan selects passages from James’ epistle to support this attitude, “For the sun rises with scorching heat and withers the plant; its blossom falls, and its beauty is destroyed. In the same way, the rich man will fade away even while he goes about his business.”¹⁹³ Aslan sees James as having concern for the poor, contempt for the wealthy, and respect for the Mosaic law. He believes James spent the last years of his life dispatching people to visit Paul’s congregations to try to dispel the erroneous teachings of Jesus being introduced by Paul to his followers.¹⁹⁴

Aslan also believes James’ efforts eventually brought Paul to repentance when he came to Jerusalem and, at James’ advice, went to the temple to perform a “Nazarite Vow.”¹⁹⁵ Aslan interprets this act of Paul as “a solemn renunciation of his ministry and a public declaration of James’s authority over him,” a conclusion he makes without support from other sources.¹⁹⁶ This is another example of Aslan’s approach to resolving

¹⁹² Eusebius, *Eusebius’ Ecclesiastical History: Complete and Unabridged*, Translated by Christian Frederick Crusé, New Updated edition, 3 printing (Peabody, Hendrickson Publishers, 2001), 2.23.

¹⁹³ James 1:11.

¹⁹⁴ Aslan, *Zealot*, 207. Aslan also refers to the passage of Galatians 2:11–14 in which emissaries sent by James to Antioch compel Peter to stop eating with Gentiles, while the ensuing fight between Peter and Paul leads Barnabas to leave Paul and return to James.

¹⁹⁵ Acts 21:24-26.

¹⁹⁶ Aslan, *Zealot*, 209.

paradoxes. How could Paul no longer believe the law applied and at the same time perform an act according to the law? Aslan's solution is that Paul submitted to James' request as an act of submission to James' teachings over his own.¹⁹⁷ Aslan does not consider the possibility that Paul, by taking James' advice to perform a temple rite, was demonstrating *both* his respect for the law *and* his belief in salvation by faith alone, i.e., Paul believed he could respect this local custom without compromising his beliefs. James, a representative of Aslan's historical Jesus, is seen by Aslan as holding firm to his beliefs despite strong opposition and ultimately winning his adversary over to repentance and right thinking.

The reconstruction of the Jesus provided by Aslan is explained by his critics. Richard Horsley says Aslan "cherry-picks" images, phrases, and episodes from the Gospels, without critical analysis of his sources, to shape Jesus as a zealot messiah who intended to dispel the Romans and reestablish the kingdom of David.¹⁹⁸ An example supporting Horsley's charge of "cherry-picking" can be observed in the way Aslan uses James to shape his understanding of the historical Jesus. While venerating James' authority and appreciation for his epistle, Aslan offers no comment about the opening line of James' epistle, "James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ."¹⁹⁹ While the

¹⁹⁷ Ibid, 201.

¹⁹⁸ Richard Horsley, "Reza Aslan, Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth." *Critical Research on Religion* 2(2) (2014): 195–221.

¹⁹⁹ James 1:1.

term “Lord” can be translated ‘teacher’ or ‘master,’ the term is used in both the Old and New Testament Scriptures to denote deity.²⁰⁰ Aslan does not address this challenge to his understanding of Jesus.

Some of the authors of my primary sources find Aslan’s Jesus atypical. Saritoprak says of Aslan’s *Zealot*, “The book is about the historical Jesus and has nothing at all to do with the [sic] Islam’s Jesus, who, as I hope to show in this book is, in reality, not at all dissimilar from Christianity’s Jesus.”²⁰¹ And Ataie says, “Aslan’s portrayal of Jesus is spiritually anemic, and while ... academically rigorous, it is difficult to situate him within normative Muslim parameters.”²⁰²

According to Aslan, Jesus was a “revolutionary zealot who walked across Galilee gathering an army of disciples with the goal of establishing the Kingdom of God on earth, [a] magnetic preacher who defied the authority of the Temple priesthood in Jerusalem, [a] radical Jewish nationalist who challenged the Roman occupation and lost.”²⁰³ Perhaps Aslan is empathetic to this Jesus because like Muhammad, he took on the established powers. In Aslan’s *No god but God*, he admires Muhammad for being an advocate for reform and economic justice and points out, “For this revolutionary and profoundly

²⁰⁰ Larry W. Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co, 2003), 109. Hurtado says in Jewish circles in the first century, the term “Lord” was used to refer to the God of the Bible. Also see Robert M. Bowman and J. Ed Komoszewski, *Putting Jesus in His Place: The Case for the Deity of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2007). Chap. 13.

²⁰¹ Saritoprak, *Islam’s Jesus*, xi.

²⁰² Ataie, *Authenticating the Johannine Injil*, 21.

²⁰³ Aslan, *Zealot*, 215-16.

innovative message, he was more or less ignored.”²⁰⁴ Aslan’s Jesus, like Muhammad, was a champion of the poor, enemy to the wealthy, a staunch advocate for keeping the law of God, which included worshiping the one true God. Aslan sees in his historical Jesus all these attributes which ultimately resulted in his and James’ death. Jesus was like Muhammad, but, unlike Muhammad, is still awaiting his vindication as a prophet of Islam. It is this failed, but waiting to be venerated, prophet/messiah that captures Aslan’s admiration. Saritoprak says of Aslan’s *Zealot*, “The book is about the historical Jesus and has nothing at all to do with Islam’s Jesus, who, as I hope to show in this book is, in reality, not at all dissimilar from Christianity’s Jesus.”²⁰⁵ Ataie says, “Aslan’s portrayal of Jesus is spiritually anemic, and while ... academically rigorous, it is difficult to situate him within normative Muslim parameters.”²⁰⁶

With this understanding of Aslan’s Jesus, it is possible to construct a description of the “Islamic reformation” mentioned by Aslan above but not articulated in *Zealot*. Aslan has a passion for social and economic justice and reform. This is evident from his statements regarding the qualities he admired in Jesus, James, and Muhammad. Aslan’s Jesus was a zealous human being, with a passion for the poor, disdain for the wealthy, a love for the Mosaic law, and new teachings like the Beatitudes to expand the existing law. James was always “defending the poor and weak against the wealthy and powerful” and

²⁰⁴ Reza Aslan, *No god but God: The Origins and Evolution of Islam* (New York: Delacorte Press, 2011), 69.

²⁰⁵ Saritoprak, *Islam’s Jesus*, xi.

²⁰⁶ Ataie, *Authenticating the Johannine Injil*, 21.

holding firm to his beliefs despite strong opposition and ultimately winning his adversary over to repentance and right thinking.²⁰⁷ And Muhammad was an advocate for reform and economic justice. Aslan saw Jesus as a mere mortal who was not gifted with any divine attributes or metaphysical powers, and yet he stood firm against the injustices of his day introducing a new “law”, the Beatitudes. Aslan’s “reform” takes the focus off any special attributes Islam may ascribe to Jesus and spotlights the teachings and actions of Jesus, specifically the Beatitudes and his zeal for social and economic justice.

The question remains, why should this reform be expected to begin with Muslim Americans? Aslan does not specifically address this question in *Zealot*, but it is clear from his critics, who include some of the primary source authors, that Aslan’s Jesus is “difficult to situate within normative Muslim parameters.”²⁰⁸ Americans generally tolerate atypical religious and social/economic justice ideas, and this provides a favorable climate for expression and actualization of Aslan’s understandings of Jesus, by Muslims or non-Muslims. Aslan affirms the idea of America as a “favorable climate” for change when he says:

The task of defining Jesus’ message fell instead to a new crop of educated, urbanized, Greek-speaking Diaspora Jews who would become the primary vehicles for the expansion of the new faith. As these extraordinary men and women, many of them immersed in Greek philosophy and Hellenistic thought, began to reinterpret Jesus’ message so as to make it more palatable both to their fellow Greek-speaking Jews and to their gentile neighbors in the Diaspora, they gradually transformed Jesus from a revolutionary zealot to a Romanized demigod, from a

²⁰⁷ Aslan, *Zealot*, 212.

²⁰⁸ Ataie, *Authenticating the Johannine Injil*, 21.

man who tried and failed to free the Jews from Roman oppression to a celestial being wholly uninterested in any earthly matter.²⁰⁹

Just as “a new crop of educated, urbanized, Greek-speaking Jews” transformed the understandings of James about Jesus to the understandings of Paul, so perhaps a new crop of educated, urbanized, English-speaking Muslims in America, with the personal freedom to articulate their ideas, can reclaim James’ understandings of Jesus and bring about the social and economic reforms that Muhammad, Jesus, and James desired. This seems to be a possible future, as envisioned by Aslan.

2.2 Fatih Harpci

Harpci is Associate Professor of Religion at Carthage College in Kenosha, Wisconsin. Born and raised in Turkey, Harpci came to America for post-graduate studies at Temple University. His Ph.D. thesis, *Muhammad Speaking of the Messiah: Jesus in the Hadith Tradition*, examines hadīth reports of Prophet Muhammad’s words about and attitudes toward Jesus. He often facilitates conversations at interfaith gatherings of young American Muslims, Christians, Jewish groups, and others.²¹⁰ He does not identify himself as Sunnī, Shi’a, or Sufi in his writings, but his thesis relies exclusively on Sunni Hadīth to articulate his understandings. His reluctance to identify with an Islamic sect makes him of interest; this appears to be part of a strategy to reach a broader audience

²⁰⁹ Aslan, *Zealot*, 171.

²¹⁰ Claire Davidson, “One Local Muslim’s Mission: Understanding,” *The Wisconsin Jewish Chronicle*, June 22, 2020.

of Muslims in America and may result in new understandings of the Jesus of Islam. While Harpci's thesis has not been formally published, it is available online.²¹¹ He has also written 11 essays used as book chapters in published works since 2017.

This introduction will present Harpci's purpose for choosing his thesis topic, discuss his approach to accomplishing his stated objective, demonstrate his close adherence to formative-classical understandings, discuss his misconceptions of the Jesus of the Gospels and the meta-narrative of Christian Scripture, recognize his contribution to Muslim eschatology through his understanding of *nuzūl* 'Īsā as a non-literal event, consider the sources for his ideas, and identify the relevance of his thesis to this work.

Harpci states as his main purpose, "to take Christians and Muslims from mutual ignorance to sincere dialogue."²¹² To accomplish his objective, he examines the person of the Jesus of Islam as understood by the Prophet. He limits his primary sources to nine classical Sunni Hadīth collections, also known as "*Al-Kutub al-Tis'ah* (the Nine Books); *Sahih of al-Bukhārī*, *Sahih of Muslim*, *Sunan of Abū Dāwūd*, *Sunan of Ibn Mājah*, *Sunan of al-Tirmidhī*, *Sunan of al-Nasā'ī*, *Muwatta' of Imam Malik*, *Musnad of Ibn Hanbal*, and *Sunan of al-Darimī*."²¹³ To establish the reliability of his sources, Harpci relies on the conclusions of Mazhar U. Kazi (b. 1936 CE). Harpci says, "According to Dr. Kazi, especially the works of al-Bukhārī and Muslim are considered to be reliable and are termed

²¹¹ Harpci, *Muhammad Speaking of the Messiah*, 2013.

²¹² *Ibid*, 196-8.

²¹³ *Ibid*, xi.

correct.”²¹⁴ Kazi’s influence upon Harpci is evident as Harpci quotes Kazi in his opening chapter, “The sunnah and ahadīth are not to be taken as the wise sayings of sages and philosophers or the verdicts of rulers and leaders. One should believe with full conviction that the words and actions of the Prophet represent the will of Allah, and thus one has to follow and obey them in each and every circumstance of life.”²¹⁵ That Harpci embraces Kazi’s “full conviction” regarding the historical trustworthiness of the Hadīth is demonstrated by his predominant use of hadīth to move his readers from “mutual ignorance to sincere dialogue.” As a result, Harpci’s thesis is an excellent resource for documenting a formative-classical understanding of the Jesus of Islam as presented in the Hadīth. He demonstrates the least change from formative-classical understandings of the primary sources.

It is curious that Harpci does not identify the purpose of his thesis until the end. He says in his concluding chapter, “Through this study, I aimed to provide the structure, background, and careful exposition of Qur’anic passages and hadīth reports on the birth, life, departure/death, and return of Jesus Christ ... The purpose of this study is to take Christians and Muslims from mutual ignorance to sincere dialogue ... a constructive inter-

²¹⁴ Mazhar U. Kazi, *A Treasury of Ahadīth*, (Jeddah, Saudi Arabia: Abūl-Qāsim Publishing House, 1992), 11; as cited in Harpci, *Muhammad Speaking of the Messiah*, 10-11. Harpci quotes Kazi as saying, “All that was humanly possible for ensuring the authenticity of the ahadīth was completed by the third century Hijrah... no other religion, nation, party or even small group of people can parallel what the early Muslims did to ensure the authenticity of ahadīth and the sunna[h].”

²¹⁵ *Ibid*, 2.

religious dialogue.”²¹⁶ Does Harpci accomplish this purpose using his approach and topics? I will address this question by examining the topics he chooses to correct “mutual ignorance” then comment on his delay in revealing the purpose of his thesis until his concluding chapter.

Harpci summarizes the ideas important to his thesis in his introduction, “Understanding Islamic beliefs about ‘Īsā’s prophethood and [Islamic] eschatology more fully ... the dissertation focuses especially on Prophet Muhammad’s statements concerning ‘Īsā’s parousia (return to earth) and his messianic roles toward the End Times.”²¹⁷ Before presenting his ideas, he offers a defense of the trustworthiness of the Hadīth, which is a highly contested and ongoing debate explored by many scholars.

Roberts, discussed in the Literature Review, says there are inconsistencies in the Hadīth:

Significantly ... a number of Muslim scholars have questioned the validity of appealing to Prophetic traditions (Hadiths) in Qur’anic exegesis. Ibn ‘Āshūr (d. 1393/1973), for example, notes that the Prophet himself interpreted few verses, and that the traditions traced back to his Companions exhibit numerous inconsistencies (Zahniser 2008, 57, quoting Ibn ‘Āshūr 1960-, 1:28–29). Other scholars who have questioned the validity of interpreting the Qur’an on the basis

²¹⁶ Harpci, *Muhammad Speaking of the Messiah*, 196-198.

²¹⁷ *Ibid*, viii.

of Hadiths include Muhammad ‘Abduh (d. 1323/1905), and Sayyid Quṭb (d. 1386/1966) (Zahniser 2008, 57).²¹⁸

While the statement above specifically addresses the use of Hadīth to interpret Qur’anic passages, Roberts suggests that there are “numerous inconsistencies” in the Hadīth and that one needs to be cautious in the selection of Hadīth for their exegesis. Harpci’s claim that the Hadīth he has selected should be embraced with “full conviction” could be contested according to Roberts. However, using his chosen sources, Harpci’s understandings of ‘Īsā’s prophethood and Islamic eschatology are consistent with formative-classical understandings outlined in Chapter 1.1 regarding the birth, life, miracles, sayings, and ascension of Jesus. Harpci’s understandings of ‘Īsā can be summarized best when he says the Islamic tradition “greatly reveres him [‘Īsā] and at the same time rejects his divinity.”²¹⁹

In the discussion of events occurring after the ascension of Jesus, Harpci’s adherence to formative-classical understandings loosens. He suggests that the views of the End Time and the Hereafter [to include Jesus’ descent] revealed in the Qur’an and expressed in the Hadīth should be understood in allegorical or spiritual terms rather than

²¹⁸ Roberts, “A Muslim Reflects on Christ Crucified: Stumbling-Block or Blessing?”, 316.

²¹⁹ Harpci, *Muhammad Speaking of the Messiah*, xiv.

literal.²²⁰ He credits Sa'd al-Dīn al-Taftāzānī (d. 1390 CE) with this idea, which will be discussed later.²²¹

Harpci explains why he prefers a symbolic instead of literal interpretation regarding *nuzūl* 'Īsā. Harpci says he wants “Western readers in particular, whether or not they are Christians, [to be] aided to understand Islamic beliefs about 'Īsā, prophethood, and eschatology more fully.”²²² Western Muslims, especially American Muslims that Harpci engages in his classrooms, are immersed in a culture that has understandings opposing Muslim beliefs. It appears that Harpci believes a factual approach to the person of 'Īsā and his prophethood, derived from reliable hadīth, offers a basis for discussion amid alternative Western understandings of Jesus. Harpci prefers an allegorical interpretation of *nuzūl* 'Īsā because it offers a present, as opposed to a future, hope and serves to better engage the West than suggesting conflict is needed to pave the way for the coming of Jesus. It will be demonstrated that the idea that *nuzūl* 'Īsā may be an allegorical or spiritual, as opposed to a physical descent, is significant.

I can propose why Harpci delayed stating the reason for choosing the topic of his thesis until the end of his text. I know his approach is to defend the truth of Islam by

²²⁰ Ibid, 192.

²²¹ Ibid, 193. Also see Muammer İskenderoğlu, “Al-Taftazani, Sa'd al-Din” *The Biographical Encyclopaedia of Islamic Philosophy* ((s.l.): Continuum, 2010). Al-Taftāzānī was one of the best-known theologians within the Ash'arī tradition of Sunni Islam. His commentary on the creed of al-Nasafī became a textbook for students for generations and exerted an immense influence upon the later generations of Sunni Muslims.

²²² Harpci, *Muhammad Speaking of the Messiah*, iii.

demonstrating the trustworthiness of the Hadīth. After offering formative-classical understandings of the Jesus of Islam, he proposes that *nuzūl ʿĪsā* should be interpreted as an allegorical instead of literal event. Believing he has established a firm foundation, he states his intent to “take Christians and Muslims from mutual ignorance to sincere dialogue.” There is a logical progression in his method. He attempts to earn the trust of his readers before suggesting, at the end of his thesis, that some of his readers are “ignorant” regarding Islamic Scripture. “Sincere dialogue” is the object of Harpci’s thesis, and he believes this can be accomplished through a scholarly presentation of the Jesus of Islam and an allegorical interpretation of *nuzūl ʿĪsā*.

Despite Harpci’s efforts to present Islamic teachings objectively and engage in “sincere dialogue,” his approach is polemical towards Christian ideas. He says, “Another major struggle is the fact that the Qur’an and Hadīth do not always tally with the New Testament. To a Muslim this simply means that the carelessness of Christians has led them to alter or corrupt their Holy Scripture. So, Islam persists in giving us an image of Jesus very different from that which we find in the New Testament.”²²³ Regarding whether Muslims and Christians worship the same God, he says the answer should be “clearly and unhesitatingly in the affirmative,” which disregards the concerns some Christians may have to a “clear and unhesitating affirmation” without qualification.²²⁴

²²³ Ibid, 121.

²²⁴ Ibid, 69; it was discussed in “Conventions” above that it is beyond the scope of this thesis to address differences in understandings in the Supreme Deity by these groups. But differences exist and Harpci does not acknowledge these, which would be helpful when trying to establish “sincere” interfaith dialogue.

Harpci interprets Muslim [and Christian] Scripture as a series of narratives in which prophets come and go with one purpose, to remind mankind “to worship the One-True God. He [Jesus] is not different from other prophets in this respect.”²²⁵ This is an Islamic framework for understanding scriptures. Harpci does not consider the possible contribution of the prophets and events of scripture to a story greater than the sum of the individual stories. This is evident when he discusses the role of sacrifice in the Old Testament. Harpci says, “In Islam sacrifices are not penance for sin but represent one’s devotion to God.”²²⁶ The lens through which Harpci views Islamic [and Christian] Scripture regarding the role of sacrifice is a narrative calling people to one purpose, to worship and obey the one true God. The idea that God may be saying, through the role of sacrifice, that there can be no forgiveness without the shedding of blood (the greater story) is not discussed by Harpci. He says, “No sacrificial intercessor is possible. Instead, God forgives those who sincerely repent.”²²⁷ For Harpci, the forgiveness of God depends on “sincere repentance,” not sacrifice. This is an example of Harpci’s presentation shifting from informing to teaching, from dialogue to argument, instead of the “constructive inter-religious dialogue” he intends to promote.

Harpci condemns Christian Trinitarian theology. He considers Christians to be in the same category as the pagan polytheists in Arabia at the time of Muhammad, a

²²⁵ Ibid, 101.

²²⁶ Ibid, 117.

²²⁷ Ibid.

characterization Christians would deny and consider disparaging. He says, “The idea of a ‘son of God’ has echoes of the daughters of Allah in pre- Islamic Arabia.”²²⁸ Harpci got this idea, that Christians may be polytheists like the “daughters of Arabia,” from his interpretation of Qur’an 21:92-98. Harpci says, “When the Qur’ān clarified Jesus’ identity, making it clear that he was only a human being who worshiped God, they did not like this and desired to continue to use the fact that many Christians deified him as an alleged argument for their polytheism.”²²⁹ Harpci’s argument is that anyone who thinks Christ is divine is no better than a polytheist. He quotes Muhammad, “Everyone who wishes to be worshiped to the exclusion of God will be with those who worship him. They worship only Satans and those they have ordered to be worshiped.”²³⁰ Of Christians who are convinced that their understandings are true and the only way to salvation he says, “Christians having this understanding are aggressive and disdainful towards non-Christians [Muslims].”²³¹ Harpci’s understanding of Christian concepts is incomplete and his polemical style undermines his stated purpose of creating an environment for “sincere dialogue.”

In the introduction to his thesis, Harpci says, “The dissertation’s main thesis is that an examination of the Hadīths’ reports of Muhammad’s words about and attitudes

²²⁸ Ibid, 106.

²²⁹ Ibid. Harpci quotes Qur’an 21:98, “You and all the things you deify and worship apart from God are but firewood for Hell. You are bound to arrive in it.”

²³⁰ Qur’an 21:101.

²³¹ Harpci, *Muhammad Speaking of the Messiah*, 119.

toward ʿĪsā will lead to fuller understandings about Jesus-ʿĪsā among Muslims and propose to non-Muslims new insights into Christian tradition about Jesus.”²³² It is challenging to contribute to the existing body of knowledge through the examination of the Qur’an and Hadīth which have been discussed by scholars for millennia. Harpci recognizes this obstacle saying, “Much has been written about Qur’ānic references to Jesus (ʿĪsā in Arabic), yet no work has been done on the structure or formal analysis of the numerous references to ʿĪsā in the Hadīth, that is, the collection of writings that report the sayings and actions of the Prophet Muhammad.”²³³ Harpci believes that examination of hadīth sayings about ʿĪsā will yield a meaningful addition to the existing body of knowledge. However, the first three of four chapters of Harpci’s thesis only affirm formative-classical understandings.

In Chapter 5, Harpci’s thesis begins a new trajectory as he addresses eschatological understandings within Islam and the role of ʿĪsā in his return. His polemical style transforms into a thoughtful examination of Islamic writings. Knowing that Jesus has a significant role in both Islamic and Christian eschatology, Harpci highlights the role Jesus will play in Islamic eschatology in his effort to enhance Muslim-Christian dialogue. Harpci’s focus on the allegorical and spiritual significance of the return of Jesus (*nuzūl* ʿĪsā) will be discussed in later chapters.

²³² Ibid, viii.

²³³ Ibid.

There are two contributions from Harpci's thesis to the existing body of knowledge and this research regarding Harpci's understandings of 'Īsā. First, while formative-classical understandings of 'Īsā have developed for over a millennium through the exegesis of Muslim Scripture by many Muslim scholars, Harpci's thesis is an excellent collection of hadīth supporting formative-classical understandings. Second, Harpci says, "Even though the wording in these Hadīths [his nine classical Hadīth sources] seems to express a physical return and a set of actions Jesus will perform, they could possibly be symbolic expressions which make implications about some future events and relationships for the present."²³⁴ The idea that the return of 'Īsā could be an allegorical or spiritual event as brought forward by Harpci is an interpretation with significant explanatory power for contemporary American Muslims living in a culture that might dismiss a physical return. He is offering a Jesus that can bring about a present, as opposed to a future, hope. Harpci has made the return of 'Īsā a reasonable topic for the secular public square for two reasons: First, because of its benefits to society now, which I will discuss in greater detail later; and second, because he has provided Muslims and non-Muslims with an epistemological foundation for the beliefs held by many Muslims about 'Īsā. In this regard he has achieved his objective of providing an environment for "constructive ... sincere dialogue."

²³⁴ Ibid, xvii.

I will examine some of Harpci's findings, especially regarding 'Īsā's role in Islamic eschatology, and offer findings that demonstrate deviation from formative-classical understandings despite Harpci, of all the authors, holding the position most consistent with those understandings. Regarding his teaching at Carthage College, Harpci's approach is to view both the Bible and the Qur'an as "scripture."²³⁵ This is not the common position of formative-classical understandings which, as stated above by Harpci, claim Christian Scriptures have been corrupted. Harpci holds two views in tension: Christians have corrupted their scriptures, and the Bible is scripture. The views expressed by Harpci at Carthage College postdate his thesis and may represent change in his understanding of Christian Scripture. Alternatively, Harpci may possess the view that it is the interpretation of Christian Scripture by Christians that is corrupt and not the Scripture itself. Harpci clearly embraces the "corrupted text" interpretation in his thesis.

Harpci concludes by returning to a conciliatory tone inviting Muslim and Christians to engage in dialogue "with mutual respect, understanding and cooperation ... We should forget misinformation and misconception about each other and begin to know each other."²³⁶ His thesis, an apologetic for the truth of Islam, often undermines his

²³⁵ R. T. Both, "Professor Teaches about Islam in Popular Classes at Carthage College," *Wisconsin Muslim Journal* (blog), (August 2, 2019); Both quotes Harpci as saying, "The Sages class looks at both the Qur'an and the Bible as scripture. The Prophets are chosen by God – as in the Jewish and Christian traditions, and they call their nation and their people to believe in one God and one Creator. In Islamic tradition, Adam, Moses, David, Solomon, Jesus are all prophets, teaching the same message: There is one God. Believe in Him. Though only 25 prophets are mentioned by name in the Qur'an . . . 22 of those are also figures you see in the Bible."

²³⁶ Harpci, *Muhammad Speaking of the Messiah*, 198 -199.

admonition to practice “mutual respect” and “understanding” through his weak understanding or acknowledgement of Christian views. Yet, I can embrace Harpci’s final admonition and use his thesis to “forget misinformation and misconception about each other and begin to know each other.”

2.3 Conclusions

Aslan’s *Zealot* appears to have been a catalyst for the works of the primary sources potentially motivating the authors to correct or clarify his characterizations. Three of the authors, Ataie, Akyol and Saritoprak, specifically mention Aslan’s work and Ataie refers to Aslan’s Jesus as “spiritually anemic.”²³⁷ Aslan’s understandings of Islam’s Jesus, being outside both normative Muslim and Christian parameters, will provide contrast in the direction of departure of understandings by the primary sources. I have presented Aslan’s presuppositions, ideas, and conclusions regarding the reliability of the Gospels, the Historical Jesus movement, the importance of James the brother of Jesus and his writings, and Aslan’s “Islamic reformation” and belief that this will be led by Muslim Americans. In Chapter 8, I will examine Aslan’s understandings of the Jesus of Islam for variations from formative-classical positions and conclude that they conflict with those understandings.

²³⁷ Ataie, *Authenticating the Johannine Injil*, 21.

Harpci's close adherence to formative-classical understandings is to be expected since he relies almost entirely on the Hadīth. It is his objective to move his readers, Christian and Muslim, from "mutual ignorance to sincere dialogue" and to accomplish this, he limits his primary sources to nine classical Sunni Hadīth collections. I discussed his misunderstandings of Christian concepts but recognized his contribution to Muslim eschatology through his understanding of *nuzūl* ʿĪsā as a non-literal event and considered the sources for his ideas. His significance to this work will be demonstrated in the chapters that follow.

Chapter 3 - Al-Jibouri and Saritoprak

3.1 Yasin al-Jibouri

Al-Jibouri, a Shi'a Muslim, lives in Kissimmee, Florida and is an Iraqi American writer, published author, editor, and translator/interpreter/publisher. He has authored over eighty books including *Mary and Jesus in Islam*, which he says was written to convince others to embrace the Islamic faith and “see how Jesus Christ and his saintly mother are very, very highly revered.”²³⁸ I will position al-Jibouri as closely aligned with formative-classical understandings and propose that he was writing in response to a perceived need to correct the misunderstandings of Muslims living in Christian communities. I will examine al-Jibouri’s arguments for the fallacy of Christianity, explore his reasoning, and conclude with al-Jibouri’s appeal to his readers to “get to know the truth.”²³⁹

Of the six primary source authors, only Harpci is more aligned than al-Jibouri with formative-classical understandings of ʿĪsā. Al-Jibouri quotes the Qur’an and Hadīth often to demonstrate his close adherence to their teachings. In a comparison of Christian and Muslim beliefs, al-Jibouri affirms formative-classical understandings including that ʿĪsā

²³⁸ Yasin al-Jibouri, *Mary and Jesus in Islam* (Roanoke: Yasin, 2014), 181.

²³⁹ Ibid, 188.

was created by a “Word of Allah’ and born of a virgin, ‘Īsā was not killed or crucified but ascended bodily to heaven, and ‘Īsā will return physically at his Second Coming.²⁴⁰

An influential work for al-Jibouri, outside of Islamic Scripture, is the Gospel of Barnabas. He questions the exclusion of the Gospel of Barnabas from the Christian Gospels saying, “Why is the name of Saint Barnabas not among them, and how did he come to write his own Gospel, the only one accepted by Muslims as the true Bible?”²⁴¹ Al-Jibouri affirms many teachings from the Gospel of Barnabas to include: ‘Īsā was not crucified and it was Judas Iscariot who was crucified; it “contains the true teachings of Jesus Christ;” and it refers to the Prophet Muhammad as the “Paraclete” (Messenger and Comforter) to come.²⁴² He offers this recommendation to his readers, “The reader is encouraged to obtain a copy of the Gospel of Saint Barnabas and compare it with other existing Bibles, be they those accepted by the Catholics or those endorsed by the Protestants and judge for himself as to how much distortion the message of Christ has suffered and is still suffering.”²⁴³ While a detailed critique of the Gospel of Barnabas is beyond my focus, it is relevant to understand how this work may have influenced al-Jibouri given his full endorsement of its contents.

²⁴⁰ Al-Jibouri, *Mary and Jesus in Islam*, 90-91;161.

²⁴¹ *Ibid*, 124.

²⁴² *Ibid*, 126-127. Also see Lonsdale and Laura Ragg, ed. *The Gospel of Barnabas* (London: Oxford University Press, 1907), 349 – Judas crucified in Jesus’ place; 362 – Prophet Muhammad as Paraclete.

²⁴³ *Ibid*, 133.

Leirvik says, “The alleged Gospel [of Barnabas] is regarded by many Muslims as going back to a manuscript from early Christianity, whereas Western scholars take it for granted that it was produced either in the late Middle Ages or in the early modern period. To say the least, the Barnabas controversy has not been conducive to mutual understanding and respect between Muslim and Christian scholars.”²⁴⁴ Al-Jibouri does not address the controversial nature of the Gospel of Barnabas but accepts it *a priori*. There are conflicts with Islamic Scripture in the Gospel of Barnabas, but what is relevant is that al-Jibouri suggests to new Muslim converts that Christian Scriptures cannot be trusted because they are corrupt and recommends that they correct their misunderstandings by reading a “Gospel” that he accepts *a priori* when other scholars would disagree with his supposition.²⁴⁵

Leirvik summarizes the Gospel of Barnabas’ content as follows: “[Within the Gospel of Barnabas] the prize argument of classical Muslim polemic, that of the falsification of Jewish and Christian Scriptures, is abundantly attested. The Gospel of Barnabas recounts much of the biblical Gospel material, only with distinct emphases and additions. It adds a substantial amount of apocryphal material and excels in midrash-like

²⁴⁴ Leirvik, *Images of Jesus Christ in Islam*, 132.

²⁴⁵ Christine Schirrmacher, *Mit den Waffen des Gegners* (1992), 342f, 353f. Schirrmacher says Muhammad Yahyā al-Hāshimī (World Islamic League of Mecca) questions the Gospel of Barnabas as a reliable source “because an early composition date for the book is not possible.” Further, al-Hāshimī “criticizes [others’] readiness to ascribe to the book prophecy concerning Muhammad, when the work obviously emerged long after Islam and was declared as non-canonical by the Church.” Al-Hāshimī adds, “in order to find prophecies concerning Muhammad in the Gospels, one does not need non-canonical texts.” I am grateful to Allan Phillips for translating Schirrmacher regarding al-Hāshimī’s comments.

readings of the Old Testament.”²⁴⁶ It will be demonstrated that one of al-Jibouri’s main topics for correcting the beliefs of new Muslim converts is that Christian theology is derived from corrupted documents.

The Gospel of Barnabas shapes al-Jibouri’s understandings regarding “falsification of Jewish and Christian Scriptures.” In the preamble to the Gospel of Barnabas, “Barnabas” introduces himself and says that Jesus was just a man who was “super-naturally endowed by God,” but when Paul came on the scene, a new period of Christian theology began based on Paul’s personal experience and “contemporary Greek thought” which introduced the deification of Jesus.²⁴⁷ The Gospel of Barnabas is a useful source for appreciating al-Jibouri’s understandings. Leirvik concluded his analysis of the Gospel of Barnabas saying, “The early twentieth century Indian and Arab Muslims found the alleged Gospel to be a useful weapon in their resistance to Christian, missionary efforts.”²⁴⁸ This provides support for the premise that al-Jibouri is selecting texts and topics to counter stray beliefs of new Muslim converts. The Gospel of Barnabas is apt for his purposes.

Al-Jibouri states, “This address [book] is directed specifically to new Muslim converts in the West in general and in the U.S. in particular.”²⁴⁹ Al-Jibouri states that he is also writing to “open-minded Christians” and “Muslims who live in ‘Christian’

²⁴⁶ Leirvik, *Images of Jesus Christ in Islam*, 133.

²⁴⁷ Ragg, ed., *The Gospel of Barnabas*, 9.

²⁴⁸ Leirvik, *Images of Jesus Christ in Islam*, 144.

²⁴⁹ Al-Jibouri, *Mary and Jesus in Islam*, 181.

communities overseas” to inform them of Islam’s Jesus based on his having attended many Christian churches in America, particularly Atlanta, Georgia.²⁵⁰ Al-Jibouri chooses to speak to new converts to Islam in America through formative-classical understandings of Jesus. Given that his book is about the Jesus of Islam, it is possible that the nature of his concern for new converts and Muslims in “Christian communities” is a drift in their understandings of the Jesus of Islam, or for him, the Jesus of formative-classical Islam. This view is supported by his statement that *Mary and Jesus in Islam* was written to “see how Jesus Christ and his saintly mother are very, very highly revered.”²⁵¹ The key word in this sentence is “how.” His book is not about venerating Mary and Jesus, as he expects this to be done by all Muslims, but it is about the appropriate *how* of their veneration.²⁵² The *how* that al-Jibouri employs is strict adherence to Qur’anic and Hadīth verses regarding topics he emphasizes highlighting understandings of the Jesus of Islam he perceives are errant amongst Muslims in America.

Al-Jibouri offers four arguments for the fallacy of Christianity: First, few documents are trustworthy for Christian theology; second, Christianity resembles many ancient pagan beliefs and practices; third, most Christians are very poor examples of Jesus’ teachings; and lastly, Jesus’ miracles were special but always done with the permission of Allah. Al-Jibouri develops each of these topics for the purpose of

²⁵⁰ Ibid, 11-12.

²⁵¹ Ibid, 181.

²⁵² Ibid, 128.

venerating Jesus properly, i.e., ensuring he is understood as the ʿĪsā of the Qurʾan and Hadīth. Examining these four topics will shed light on al-Jibouri’s insights into changes in understandings of the Jesus of Islam in “the West in general and in the U.S. in particular.”

Al-Jibouri says very few documents can be trusted to give an accurate depiction of the Jesus of Islam; specifically, those that can be trusted are the Qurʾan, “trusted hadīths,” and the Gospel of Barnabas.²⁵³ He warns his readers to reject ideas from other books or authors that might disagree with the sources he recommends to them, saying, “Whoever bases his belief in the Almighty on solid foundations will be the winner in this life and in the life to come, and the most solid of all foundations is one built on knowledge and conviction, not on ignorance, nor on taking things for granted, nor on hiding the truth or distorting it.”²⁵⁴ He laments that Muhammad is not among us now so that we may “ask him whenever we need to know” and warns that “nobody is going to hand it [truth] to you on a golden platter.”²⁵⁵ He then proceeds to encourage his readers to embrace *Mary and Jesus in Islam* as truth and “earn a place in Paradise through their dissemination of Islamic knowledge, such as the knowledge included in this book.”²⁵⁶ Because his book is based on the Qurʾan, “trusted hadīths,” and the Gospel of Barnabas, he believes it should be trusted for truth.

²⁵³ Ibid, 187-188; 142.

²⁵⁴ Ibid, 181.

²⁵⁵ Ibid, 188.

²⁵⁶ Ibid.

Al-Jibouri's second argument is his belief that Christianity resembles many ancient pagan beliefs and practices. He says, "Traces of paganism in Christianity can be seen in the concept of Christ as the "son of God," the Trinity, the Incarnate Saviour, the Second Advent, the Virgin Birth, the Sacraments, and the singing and dancing, all are very well-known practices of paganism in various parts of the world and by various cultures."²⁵⁷ Al-Jibouri is saying that all pagan religions are false, and Christianity has traces of paganism, therefore, Christianity is false. This is a reasoning error, determining truth (or error) by association. By associating some of Christianity's characteristics with pagan worship and pagan gods, he declares Christianity to be in the same category, a false religion. In the opening paragraph of al-Jibouri's *Kerbalā and Beyond* he says, "This is a tale of an ongoing struggle between right and wrong ... other religions, too, have immortalized the struggle between right and wrong: the struggle of Rama against Ravana ... such is the epic of martyrdom of Imām al-Hussain."²⁵⁸ Al-Jibouri offers the struggle of Rama and Ravana, two Hindu gods, as examples of the ongoing struggle between right and wrong and suggests, "such is the epic of martyrdom of Imām al-Hussain." Using al-Jibouri's argument, that Christianity is false because it has traces of paganism, one could question the truth of Islam because of the similarity of al-Hussain's struggle to Rama and Ravana, pagan gods.

²⁵⁷ Ibid, 171.

²⁵⁸ Yasin T. al-Jibouri, *Kerbalā and Beyond* (Newington: Yasin Publications, 2014), Prologue, para. 1.

Al-Jibouri's third argument is that Christianity is false because of the behavior of western culture and some Christians. He says, "If one traces pagan doctrines, he will be struck with similarities between what the pagans used to practice (and some still do) and what today's Christians practice at their churches."²⁵⁹ Al-Jibouri argues that most Christians do not represent the teachings of Jesus and he lists beliefs and practices of western culture and some liberal Christian denominations to demonstrate his point including sexual promiscuity, substance abuse, and moral relativism, practices that many Christians would condemn.²⁶⁰ Al-Jibouri's argument is that the truth of one's faith can be determined by the practices of its adherents. This argument is demonstrably false as every faith, including Islam, has adherents who ignore or deviate from accepted or required practices. Al-Jibouri attempts to deconstruct his reader's perceived Jesus, perhaps the Jesus of the Gospels or the Jesus of other Muslim authors, by asserting flawed source documents [Gospels], pagan-like beliefs and practices of Christian theology, and immoral behavior of Western culture and Christians.

Al-Jibouri changes his approach in his fourth argument as he asserts that the Jesus of Islam did all the miracles attributed to him in the Gospels and more, but always with the permission of Allah.²⁶¹ Rather than declare Christianity a false religion and attempt to distance his readers from its teachings, he embraces a miracle-working Jesus that his

²⁵⁹ Al-Jibouri, *Mary and Jesus in Islam*, 171.

²⁶⁰ *Ibid*, 161.

²⁶¹ Qur'an 5:110.

readers may be familiar with and attributes to him even more mystical and supernatural powers; although his power is by Allah's permission, which is different from the Jesus of the Gospels who claimed an intrinsic ability to do the miraculous. It appears that al-Jibouri attempts to recover the distance he may have created with followers of the Jesus of the Gospels through his first three arguments by offering an enhanced miracle-working Jesus of Islam.

Al-Jibouri ends *Mary and Jesus in Islam* with an appeal to his readers to "get to know the truth."²⁶² The "truth" according to al-Jibouri is in the sources he has affirmed and his book which he encourages all to copy and distribute. He discourages reading outside this canon of truth by saying, "[Muhammad's] Sunnah has suffered acutely of alteration, addition, deletion, custom designing and tailoring to fit the needs of the powerful politicians of the times, so much so that it is now very hard to find the pristine truth among all the numerous different views and interpretations."²⁶³ In his desire to present the "truth" to his readers and address a drift in the understandings of the Jesus of Islam from formative-classical understandings for new western Muslim converts, al-Jibouri provides understandings of the Jesus of Islam and demonstrates variance from formative-classical understandings which will be demonstrated in later chapters.

²⁶² Al-Jibouri, *Mary and Jesus in Islam*, 188.

²⁶³ Ibid.

Al-Jibouri has influence with Shi'a American Muslims as demonstrated by this description of him in *Shia Youth*, "You can write a book about this great man due to the thousands of those who came to know Islam through his efforts ... he is an icon in the history of Islam in the United States and the world, may the Almighty reward him most generously in this life and in the life to come."²⁶⁴ Given the divergences from formative-classical understandings of the other primary sources, it appears al-Jibouri recognized that these understandings of 'Īsā were being challenged and *Mary and Jesus in Islam* is his response.

3.2 Zeki Saritoprak

Saritoprak, a Sunnī Muslim, is Professor in the Department of Theology and Religious Studies and Bediüzzaman Said Nursi Chair in Islamic Studies at John Carroll University. He has authored more than thirty academic articles and two books in addition to his book *Islam's Jesus*. He believes the person of Jesus offers the best opportunity for interfaith dialogue between Christians and Muslims.²⁶⁵ Saritoprak states that he is "trained in classical theology."²⁶⁶ He has read Aslan's *Zealot* and disagrees with Aslan's

²⁶⁴ Yasin al-Jibouri. "Highlights of Yasin al-Jibouri #1." *Shia Youth* (blog), May 11, 2018. <https://shia-youth.org/highlights-of-yasin-al-jibouri-1/>

²⁶⁵ "Respect Graduate School | Zeki Saritoprak." Accessed May 19, 2023. <https://www.respectgs.us/speaker/zeki-saritoprak/>

²⁶⁶ Saritoprak, *Islam's Jesus*, xi.

claim that his Jesus is the Jesus of Islam.²⁶⁷ Saritoprak sees the Jesus of Islam as much more important historically and theologically than Aslan's Jesus.

It is relevant to consider the influence of Said Nursî (d. 1960) and Fethullah Gülen upon Saritoprak. Nursî was a beloved Turkish Sufi scholar and writer who inspired Gülen, a Turkish Muslim scholar and prominent preacher and imam. Gülen's Hizmet movement "is the largest civic movement in the world today" according to Saritoprak.²⁶⁸ Gülen is considered "a significant thinker, writer and leader in his own right ... [his] work essentially takes the form of a synthesis, rearticulation, or fresh application of the earlier work of Nursi and others ... [he] is a thinker and leader of striking originality and innovation"²⁶⁹ Gülen is Sufi but according to Saritoprak, he is not a traditional Sufi but "a sufi [sic] in his own way."²⁷⁰ It will be demonstrated that as Gülen articulated a "fresh application of the earlier work of Nursi and others," so Saritoprak will present a "fresh application" of formative-classical understandings of 'Īsā in his eschatological role, perhaps demonstrating the influence of Nursî and Gülen upon him.

In this section I will present Saritoprak's interest in Islamic eschatology, the focus of *Islam's Jesus*, and introduce some of his understandings about the descent of 'Īsā (*nuzūl* 'Īsā). I will discuss methods of examining Islamic Scripture to derive

²⁶⁷ Ibid.

²⁶⁸ Fredo Villaseñor, "Saritoprak Shares Knowledge of Turkish Traditions and Gülen Movement." *The Chautauquan Daily* (blog), August 18, 2013.

²⁶⁹ Greg Barton, "Fethullah Gülen and Said Nursi." *Gülen Movement*, August 26, 2012.

²⁷⁰ Ibid.

understandings of *nuzūl* ʿĪsā to include denial, literalist, and interpretive approaches. I will introduce Muslim theologians who influenced Saritoprak's understandings regarding the Qur'anic, Hadīth, literalist, and interpretive perspectives on *nuzūl* ʿĪsā and conclude with comments about Saritoprak's stated purpose for writing *Islam's Jesus*, "Muslim-Christian cooperation and the descent of Jesus."²⁷¹

Saritoprak describes himself as a scholar of Islamic eschatology.²⁷² He sees the descent of Jesus, *nuzūl* ʿĪsā, as more allegorical than literal because it seems irrational that someone should ascend to heaven and return in a physical body and, for him, the allegorical interpretation mitigates a tension in the Islamic narrative; that a literal descent seems to compete with "the finality of Muhammad's prophethood."²⁷³ Throughout the text the author demonstrates an anticipation, even excitement, for *nuzūl* ʿĪsā. He realizes the enthusiasm he demonstrates for the Jesus of Islam and pauses occasionally to reset the reader, and perhaps himself, with the fact that Muhammad is the greater prophet. The value of Saritoprak's *Islam's Jesus* to this research may be the evolution of the Jesus of Islam in a way not previously considered, the growing imminence of his return and efficacious work on behalf of Islam.

²⁷¹ Saritoprak, *Islam's Jesus*, 123.

²⁷² Ibid, xi. Also see Zeki Saritoprak, *An Overview of Death and Immortality in Islam: An Islamic Theology of the Final Day* (Independent, 2023), 105. Saritoprak's focus on Islamic eschatology is explained when he says, "By declaring that Jesus will descend toward the end of time and will bring justice, the Prophet drew our attention to this important point. He suggested that at the end of time Muslims should give prominence to the points or teachings that Jesus emphasized in his message."

²⁷³ Ibid, 105.

Saritoprak's list of 'Īsā's expected accomplishments in his descent captures some of his enthusiasm. These include bringing justice to the world and a revival of religion,²⁷⁴ expanding his mission so that it will no longer be limited to his own people but to all human beings,²⁷⁵ securing Muhammad's legacy given that Muhammad predicted 'Īsā's return,²⁷⁶ facilitating the conversion of all "people of the Book" to Islam,²⁷⁷ ending human suffering and injustice,²⁷⁸ satisfying Muhammad's longing to see his return,²⁷⁹ uniting the spiritual leaders of Christianity and Islam in their struggle against the non-religious,²⁸⁰ being the "final Mahdī" or exceeding him in rank,²⁸¹ destroying the symbol of all evil (al-Dajjāl),²⁸² and providing a "spark of great renewal in Islam ... [because of his] dominance in spirit and his enigmatic message to people."²⁸³ These ideas will be discussed later in the context of their contribution to the themes I will identify. How Saritoprak arrived at these understandings is the focus of this section.

²⁷⁴ Ibid, xiii.

²⁷⁵ Ibid, 24.

²⁷⁶ Ibid. Qur'an 3:46; 4:151; 43:57-62.

²⁷⁷ Saritoprak, *Islam's Jesus*, 26.

²⁷⁸ Ibid, 49.

²⁷⁹ Ibid, 60.

²⁸⁰ Ibid, 82.

²⁸¹ Ibid, 85.

²⁸² Ibid, 115.

²⁸³ Ibid, 116.

Qur'an 43:61 says, "He is a portent of the Hour, so have no doubt about it, and follow Me. This is a straight way." "He" is widely accepted to be Jesus since he is the subject introduced in Qur'an 43:57 as "the son of Mary." Saritoprak says, "In parts of the Islamic world, such as Egypt and Turkey, the debate over Quranic references to Jesus' descent is still quite heated."²⁸⁴ Saritoprak explains his use of the word "heated" saying, "His return to earth is not explicitly mentioned in the Qur'an, yet it is highly emphasized in the sayings of the Prophet. His return is among the major portents of the final moment of human history, known in the Qur'an as the Hour or al-Sa'a."²⁸⁵ According to Saritoprak, one cannot say for certain if the "he" in the verse above is Jesus, but he continues, "The only thing that is known for sure is that the Prophet spoke about the descent, and since the Prophet spoke about it, it is believed as truth ... but the texts on the return can be understood in both allegorical and literal ways."²⁸⁶ How does Saritoprak exegete the Islamic Scriptures to determine his understandings regarding Jesus' descent?

According to Saritoprak, there are three approaches to interpreting Qur'anic and Hadith passages regarding 'Isā's return. Saritoprak demonstrates these three methods. First, there is the "denial approach" which, according to Saritoprak, is held by those who think that the idea of the descent of Jesus is a result of modern Western philosophical

²⁸⁴ Ibid, 30.

²⁸⁵ Ibid, xiii.

²⁸⁶ Ibid, xiv.

influence, a product of the influence of Christianity on Islam.²⁸⁷ They deny all narratives that come from the Prophet about Jesus' descent, considering them to have a poor chain of transmitters and therefore to be improperly attributed to Muhammad.²⁸⁸ The second approach is the "literalist" approach.²⁸⁹ This approach "accepts all texts as they are, with no interpretation and no questioning."²⁹⁰ This method opposes the denial of any descent of Jesus, affirms a literal descent of Jesus, and stands in opposition to any interpretation of this event that does not embrace a literal descent, like the "allegorical" interpretation to follow. Scholars embracing this interpretation are discussed below along with those who influenced Saritoprak's adoption of the third approach, the "interpretive approach."

The "interpretive approach" is a more balanced interpretation of the Hadīth, according to Saritoprak. This approach accepts the authenticity of the sayings of the

²⁸⁷ Also see: Alison Howard Mathias Zahniser, *The Mission and Death of Jesus in Islam and Christianity*, (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2015), chap 2. Zahniser, affirming Saritoprak's point, says, "If my Muslim readers prove willing to consider at least the value of the interpretation of the affirming and denial verses proposed in chapter 2 above, they might be willing to consider the question, Is it possible that what is going on in the enterprise of ḥadīth studies as well as Qur'ān commentary is the solidification of a position derived from interaction with Christians after the time of the Prophet rather than a rediscovery of things that Muhammad did in fact say?"

²⁸⁸ Saritoprak, *Islam's Jesus*, 47. Also see Mark Beaumont, "Ascension without Resurrection? Muslim and Christian Debate on the Ending of Jesus' Life in the Early Islamic Period." In *Jesus and the Resurrection: Reflections of Christians from Islamic Contexts* (Oxford: Regnum, 2014), 131-2, Beaumont says, "the stories of Jesus' life and death after his return from heaven show signs of development in different directions ... the various stories of what Jesus would accomplish after his descent from heaven and before his death were added from a variety of sources in the early 9th century. These were scrutinized by the *hadith* collectors in the second half of the 9th century and those which were acceptable were included as normative accounts." This affirms Saritoprak's observation that there are differing opinions on the events of the descent of Jesus leading to the "denial approach."

²⁸⁹ *Ibid*, 47; 158.

²⁹⁰ *Ibid*, 158.

Prophet as long as their reliability is supported by well-founded hadīth criticism and contends that they should be interpreted allegorically, not literally.²⁹¹ This is the approach embraced by Saritoprak who says, “My rationale for the allegorical approach is based on my understanding of the way the Divine Will deals with humanity—namely, that God has put natural laws in place and they do not change, theologically speaking, except during the miracles of the prophets.”²⁹² Saritoprak refers to the “interpretive approach” as a “middle way” to understanding Islamic texts that avoids the extremism that sometimes accompanies the literalist and denial approaches.²⁹³ He further qualifies the interpretive approach as saying that it does not eliminate the possibility of a literal descent of Jesus because, “many Muslims believe Jesus has an angelic quality and can come and go without even being noticed.”²⁹⁴

Saritoprak’s allegorical interpretation of *nuzūl* ʿĪsā makes a significant contribution to this research because it provides opportunities for new understandings of ʿĪsā’s eschatological role and creates tension in the Islamic narrative regarding the finality of Muhammad’s prophethood. It is therefore important to understand who influenced Saritoprak to embrace the “middle way” of interpreting Islamic texts and what other views oppose it, like the “literalist” view. To introduce this discussion, Saritoprak says, “I

²⁹¹ Ibid, 47; 158.

²⁹² Ibid, 158.

²⁹³ Ibid, 122.

²⁹⁴ Ibid, 160.

am inclined to interpret Islamic texts in light of modern scholarship rather than read them simply on a literal level ... many Muslims may find my approach very new because it synthesizes classical and modern sources.”²⁹⁵ By “synthesizing classical and modern sources,” Saritoprak arrives at understandings that include an allegorical or spiritual descent of Jesus.²⁹⁶ These understandings will be discussed later in the context of their themes. The focus now is Saritoprak’s tendency to break with literal interpretations of Islamic Scripture. I will identify the “classical and modern sources” that influenced his understandings and consider Qur’anic, Hadīth, literalist, and interpretive perspectives on *nuzūl* ‘Īsā.

Saritoprak says there are at least four different passages in the Qur’an that refer to the descent of Jesus including Qur’an 3:46, 4:159, 43:61, and 53:4-5.²⁹⁷ The aim here is to examine some of the sources Saritoprak found helpful in determining his understanding of these passages and their link to *nuzūl* ‘Īsā. Qur’an 43:61, “[Jesus] is a sign for the Hour,” and Qur’an 53:4-5, “[Muhammad] does not speak out of his own fancy,” appear to have the most influence on Saritoprak’s belief in a descent of Jesus.

He says of Qur’an 43:61, “This particular verse is one of the most direct references to the eschatological descent of Jesus in the Qur’an because the Final Hour and Jesus are

²⁹⁵ Ibid, xv.

²⁹⁶ Ibid, 36.

²⁹⁷ Ibid, 23; 26; 27; 33.

connected in the verse.”²⁹⁸ Saritoprak credits Muslim theologians al-Zamakhsharī, al-Rāzī, and al-Suyūṭī (d. 1505 CE) with presenting Qur’an 43:61 as textual proof of the eschatological descent of Jesus.²⁹⁹ Despite the influence of these scholars upon Muslim understandings of Qur’an 43:61 for centuries, the debate over the meaning of this verse resurfaced in the twentieth century with Rashīd Riḍā (d. 1935 CE), Muḥammad Zāhid al-Kawtharī (d. 1952 CE), and Maḥmūd Shaltoūt (d. 1963 CE).³⁰⁰ Neither Riḍā nor Shaltoūt believed Qur’an 43:61 referred to Jesus’ ascension or descent. Riḍā said, “The summary of the story is that there is no clear dogma in the Qur’an with regard to the ascension of Jesus ... And there is no clear dogma stating that Jesus will descend from heaven.”³⁰¹ Shaltoūt said, “Surely the fact that the verse contains three possible meanings ... is enough to show that the verse is not a ‘certain dogma’ on the descent of Jesus.”³⁰² But al-Kawtharī disagreed with both the above and affirmed the long-standing interpretations of al-Zamakhsharī, al-Rāzī, and al-Suyūṭī. Al-Kawtharī’s view clearly influenced Saritoprak as he says, “According to al-Kawthari, the majority of the commentators on the Qur’an

²⁹⁸ Ibid, 29.

²⁹⁹ Ibid. Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī was one of the most prolific writers of the Middle Ages who authored works in virtually every Islamic science.

³⁰⁰ Ibid, 30.

³⁰¹ Rashīd Riḍā, *Fatawa* [Religious Decrees]. 6 vols. Beirut: Dar al-Kitab al-Jadid, 1970, 5:2025; as cited in Saritoprak, *Islam’s Jesus*, 30. Riḍā was a prominent Sunni Scholar in the 19th and 20th centuries CE who sought to reestablish the caliphate after the abolition of the Ottoman sultanate. He became one of the most influential Sunni jurists of his generation.

³⁰² Shaltoūt, *Al-Fatawa* [Religious Decrees]. Cairo: Dar al-Shuruq, 1983, 74-75; as cited in Saritoprak, *Islam’s Jesus*, 31.

find a reference to Jesus in this verse.”³⁰³ Saritoprak leaves his argument over Qur’an 43:61 for the descent of Jesus saying, “One can argue that the Qur’ānic verses about Jesus’ death and descent are not very clear, but the possibility of an allusion to the descent of Jesus in the Qur’an cannot easily be denied.”

Qur’an 53:4-5, “He [Muhammad] does not speak in vain,” also influenced Saritoprak’s understanding of *nuzūl* ‘Īsā. Saritoprak frames the argument that he is about to present from the Hadīth by saying, “If the hadith that will be discussed in the following chapters are proven to be reliable and sound as far as their relationship to the Prophet is concerned, that means the Prophet has spoken the truth about the coming of Jesus” [because Muhammad does not speak in vain].³⁰⁴ While many hadīth reference Jesus’ descent, there are some that are known to have been fabricated, according to Saritoprak, and he offers examples of both basing his understandings of *nuzūl* ‘Īsā “only on those accepted as sound.”³⁰⁵ It is beyond my focus to exegete hadīth sayings regarding the descent of Jesus, but the sources of Saritoprak’s “accepted” hadīth are relevant.

According to Abū Huraira (d. 678 CE), a companion of the Prophet, Muhammad said, “By Him in Whose Hands my soul is, son of Mary (Jesus) will shortly descend amongst you people (Muslims) as a just ruler and will break the Cross and kill the pig and abolish the Jizya (a tax taken from the non-Muslims, who are in the protection, of the

³⁰³ Saritoprak, *Islam’s Jesus*, 32-33.

³⁰⁴ Ibid, 34.

³⁰⁵ Ibid, 58-59.

Muslim government). Then there will be abundance of money and no-body will accept charitable gifts.”³⁰⁶ Nawwas bin Sam’an (d. 678 CE) authored a saying that clearly influenced Saritoprak because of its use of allegorical language affirming that Jesus will come after the Antichrist kills a young Muslim believer.³⁰⁷ Another hadīth records a dream of the Prophet in which Jesus and the Antichrist appear at the same time but Jesus has “angelic qualities” while the Antichrist has “satanic qualities.”³⁰⁸

Saritoprak admires al-Taftāzānī, saying, “Al-Taftāzānī has a unique approach to the subject [descent of Jesus]. He accepts the sayings of the Prophet and their reliability and does not deny their literal meaning. However, he opens the door for new interpretation; he was not a dogmatic scholar in this matter.”³⁰⁹ Saritoprak traces the idea of symbolic interpretation of Jesus’ descent to Abū ‘Abdillāh al-Halīmī (d. 1012) but says, “This trend of interpretation did not find many adherents until the emergence of the fourteenth-century Muslim theologian al-Taftāzānī.”³¹⁰ Harpci also quotes al-Halīmī as saying, “According to him, Jesus will temporarily descend and only those around him will hear

³⁰⁶ Al-Bukhārī 3:34:425.

³⁰⁷ Muslim, 41:7015. From Muslim ibn al-Ḥajjāj, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, Edited by Mika’il al-Almany, Translated by Abd-al-Hamid Siddiqui, 1st ed., 2009. All quotes from Muslim will be from this source unless stated otherwise. Also see Saritoprak, *Islam’s Jesus*, 67-68.

³⁰⁸ Muslim, 1:325,327,328. Also see Saritoprak, *Islam’s Jesus*, 69-70.

³⁰⁹ Saritoprak, *Islam’s Jesus*, 114.

³¹⁰ Ibid.

and see him.”³¹¹ Other Muslim theologians have expressed the view that *nuzūl* ʿĪsā is not necessarily a literal event, including Ṭaṇṭāwī Jawharī (d. 1940). Saritoprak says:

[Jawharī] a renowned commentator on the Qur’an, speaks of the coming of Jesus as an ideal time for humanity. He is squarely among the group of theologians who prefer the interpretive approach. Like some earlier scholars and theologians, he speaks of the time of Jesus’ descent as a time of peace, and in contrast to those who claim that wars or even Armageddon are needed to pave the way for the coming of Jesus, Jawharī argues that battles delay the coming of Jesus.³¹²

Having identified the sources that influenced Saritoprak’s interpretations of *nuzūl* ʿĪsā, I can progress towards Saritoprak’s rejection of literalist interpretations and identify the sources influential to his adoption of the interpretive approach. Some sources cited by Saritoprak that embrace a literalist interpretation include Nuʿman bin Thabit Abū Hanīfa (d. 767 CE), Abū al-Ḥasan ʿAlī ibn ʿAbdillāh ibn Jaʿfar al-Madīnī (d. 848 CE), Abū Jaʿfar Aḥmad aṭ-Ṭaḥāwī (d. 933 CE), Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ashʿarī (d. 936 CE), the founder of the Ashʿarī school of Islamic thought, and Abū Maṣṣūr Muḥammad al-Māturīdī (d. 944 CE). Abū Hanīfa said, “The emergence of the Antichrist, Gog and Magog, the rise of the sun from the west, the descent of Jesus, and other signs of the Hour, as mentioned in the reliable Hadith narrations, are true and will happen.”³¹³ Al-Madīnī added, “It is necessary to believe in the descent of Jesus and his killing of the Antichrist at the gate of Ludd

³¹¹ Abū Abdullah al-Husayn b. Hasan al-Halīmī, *Al-Minhāj fī Shuab al-Imān*, (Cairo: Dar al-Fikr, 1400/1979), II, 425; as cited in Harpci, *Muhammad Speaking of the Messiah*, 178.

³¹² Saritoprak, *Islam’s Jesus*, 119.

³¹³ Abū Hanīfa, *Al-Fiqh al-Akbar*, 166–68; as cited in Saritoprak, *Islam’s Jesus*, 102.

[Lod].”³¹⁴ Al-Ṭaḥāwī said, “And we, [Muslims], believe in the signs of the Hour including the emergence of the Antichrist, the descent of Jesus, son of Mary, peace be upon him, from heaven.”³¹⁵ Al-Ash‘arī said, “The people of the Sunnah ... confirm the emergence of the Antichrist and [the coming] of Jesus to kill him.”³¹⁶ And al-Māturīdī said, “When Jesus descends from heaven, he will invite all people to believe in Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him.”³¹⁷

Saritoprak says he believes the reason people believed these sayings to be true literally was because it was the interpretation of the earliest Muslim theologians who encouraged Muslims to accept a literal interpretation from the Prophet.³¹⁸ Many of his readers may agree with these scholars that the literal interpretation is the easiest to comprehend and therefore the most accurate understanding. Saritoprak adds, “One problem is still unsolved for Muslim theologians. If the Prophet Muhammad is the final messenger of God, which is a theological principle in Islam, and Jesus is also a prominent messenger of God, which all Muslims must also believe, then wouldn’t the coming of Jesus contradict the finality of Muhammad’s prophethood? This question has posed a serious challenge to Muslim theologians.”³¹⁹ This statement will be discussed in later

³¹⁴ Al-Lālikā’ī, *Sharh Usul I’tiqad Ahl*, 1:166; as cited in Saritoprak, *Islam’s Jesus*, 102.

³¹⁵ ‘Alī Ibn Abī al-‘Izz, *Sharh al-‘Aqida al-Tahawiyya*, 2:754–57; as cited in Saritoprak, *Islam’s Jesus*, 103.

³¹⁶ Al-Ash‘arī, *Al-Maqalat al-Islamiyyin*, 295; as cited in Saritoprak, *Islam’s Jesus*, 103.

³¹⁷ Al-Māturīdī, *Ta’wilat al-Qur’an*, 4:104-105; as cited in Saritoprak, *Islam’s Jesus*, 103.

³¹⁸ Saritoprak, *Islam’s Jesus*, 103.

³¹⁹ *Ibid*, 105.

chapters, but its relevance now is that Saritoprak is suggesting the literalists' approach leaves a tension within the Islamic narrative that needs to be addressed regarding the possible conflict of Jesus' descent with the finality of Muhammad's prophethood. Saritoprak is offering a significant reason to consider another interpretation, the interpretive approach, the "middle way."

To establish the foundation for the arguments he will introduce through his sources, Saritoprak states, "The Qur'an and the reliable Hadith provide the groundwork for Islamic theology and the themes within it, in our case the descent of Jesus. Even though these texts are reliable, they may seem to contradict the known principles of reason. When this is the case, Islamic theologians and jurists say that the texts should be interpreted instead of rejected."³²⁰ Saritoprak appeals to the Qur'an, which says that God does not put a burden on human beings greater than they can bear to suggest that God would not require one to believe or accept something one cannot understand.³²¹ Any conflict between the Qur'an and the Hadith should be resolved by reason and the text should be interpreted accordingly.³²² He argues that the idea of a human being descending in bodily form in front of eyewitnesses "tests the limits of reason" and therefore it must either be rejected or interpreted allegorically or spiritually.³²³ With this

³²⁰ Ibid, 112.

³²¹ Qur'an 2:233; 2:286; 6:152; 7:42; 23:62.

³²² Saritoprak, *Islam's Jesus*, 113.

³²³ Ibid.

transitional strategy, bringing centuries of literal interpretations of the descent of Jesus by Muslim scholars into question, Saritoprak offers the foundations for his interpretative understandings.

Scholars influencing Saritoprak's allegorical understandings include al-Halīmī, al-Taftāzānī, Abduh and Riḍā. Saritoprak includes al-Halīmī as a transitional figure saying, "Although al-Halīmī does not reject the literal approach totally, by mentioning this figurative approach under 'another point of view' and thus giving credibility to it, he differs with the literalist approach of many of his contemporaries, who saw the descent of Jesus as a cosmic [literal] event."³²⁴ Saritoprak credits al-Taftāzānī as being one of the first to embrace interpretive approaches to the descent of Jesus. Al-Taftāzānī said, "And some scholars have interpreted the emergence of al-Dajjal as the dominance of evil and corruption. And they interpret the descent of Jesus, peace be upon him, as the prevention of those who are evil and corrupt, and as the dominance of the good and of wholesomeness."³²⁵ Al-Taftāzānī offered this interpretation without argument, leading Saritoprak to view him as a transitional scholar from literal to interpretive interpretations of Jesus' descent.

Abduh said, "The descent of Jesus and his ruling on earth can be interpreted as the dominance of his spirit and his enigmatic message to people."³²⁶ Abduh was one of

³²⁴ Ibid, 114.

³²⁵ Al-Taftāzānī, *Sharh al-Maqasid*, 3:317; as cited in Saritoprak, *Islam's Jesus*, 115.

³²⁶ Riḍā, *Tafsir al-Manar*, 1954 ed., 3:261; as cited in Saritoprak, *Islam's Jesus*, 117.

the first modern scholars to interpret the descent of Jesus allegorically. Saritoprak comments on his work as demonstrating a lack of patience for “literalist” Muslims, blaming them for bringing about a time of “stagnation” in Islamic thought that can only be corrected by a “Jesus-centered renewal of Islamic law and Muslims’ behaviors.”³²⁷ Riḍā was introduced earlier regarding his denial that Qur’an 43:61 refers to Jesus’ ascension or descent. He did not think that hadīth should be considered the literal words of the Prophet and they probably reflected some of the narrator’s own words. He said, “These traditions have been narrated not verbatim but by the narration of the meaning of what the Prophet said. The narrator narrated what he understood, not what the Prophet meant.”³²⁸ Standing on the shoulders of these and other scholars, Saritoprak believes he has raised himself above centuries of literalist interpretations to offer a “middle way” to understand the descent of Jesus. But why this is important to him needs consideration.

Nursî provides insight into the question. Saritoprak says of him, “[Nursi] emphasized Muslim-Christian interaction and cooperation in his comments on the descent of Jesus. With Nursi, this interpretive trend takes a new direction: a dialogue and cooperation between Muslims and Christians.”³²⁹ Saritoprak continues, “Nursi interprets the descent of Jesus in the sayings of the Prophet as a renewal of Christianity and a return to the original message of Jesus, something that will promote cooperation between

³²⁷ Saritoprak, *Islam’s Jesus*, 117.

³²⁸ Riḍā, *Tafsir al-Manar*, 1954 ed., 3:317; as cited in Saritoprak, *Islam’s Jesus*, 118.

³²⁹ Saritoprak, *Islam’s Jesus*, 120.

Muslims and Christians.”³³⁰ Demonstrating Nursi’s influence upon him, Saritoprak concludes his argument for adopting the interpretive approach to the descent of Jesus saying, “Since my topic here is Muslim-Christian cooperation and the descent of Jesus, my focus is on this aspect [the descent of Jesus].”³³¹ I stated earlier that Saritoprak believes the person of Jesus in his eschatological role offers the best opportunity for interfaith dialogue between Christians and Muslims. He has made his case for his style of interpretive approach to *nuzūl* ‘Īsā over other interpretations because in his opinion, “it promotes cooperation between Muslims and Christians” better than other interpretations.

In a review of *Islam’s Jesus*, Rick Oakes says, “Professor Saritoprak could not have made his purpose for writing any clearer than when on his first page he refers to, ‘Islam’s Jesus, who, as I hope to show in this book is, in reality, not at all dissimilar from Christianity’s Jesus.’”³³² This affirms Saritoprak’s earlier statement that his purpose in writing *Islam’s Jesus* was “Muslim-Christian cooperation [through a focus on] the descent of Jesus.” Jesus has a significant role in both Muslim and Christian eschatology. Both see Jesus as the one who will bring the world together in unity, and under his rule a period of great peace and tranquility will be obtained and preserved. As a result, it is my view that

³³⁰ Ibid, 121.

³³¹ Ibid, 123.

³³² Rick Oakes, “Review of Mustafa Akyol, Zeki Saritoprak, and Gerard Mordellat Jerome Parker.”, *Islamochristiana* 43 (2017), 415.

ʿĪsā's eschatological role, as presented by Saritoprak and the other primary sources, could precipitate an enhanced appreciation of ʿĪsā and create tension in the Islamic narrative that Muhammad is the greater prophet. This will be demonstrated later where appropriate.

3.3 Conclusions

From the introductions of the primary source authors above, two observations can be made. First, al-Jibouri should be expected to remain close to formative-classical understandings since he presents himself as an arbiter of truth to correct the beliefs of new Muslim converts and draw others into the Islamic faith; straying from formative-classical understandings could result in error according to al-Jibouri. In *Mary and Jesus in Islam*, al-Jibouri contends that few documents are trustworthy for Christian theology. After offering his objections to the truth of the Christian faith, he says a Muslim can't be too careful what he reads, especially if it is Christian Gospels. Therefore, according to al-Jibouri, one needs to embrace trusted texts he has affirmed and his book *Mary and Jesus in Islam*. Despite the expectation for al-Jibouri to adhere strictly to formative-classical understandings, I will demonstrate that al-Jibouri's *Mary and Jesus in Islam* contains departures from those understandings.

Second, I expect Saritoprak's "middle way" methodology for interpreting Qur'anic and Hadīth passages to result in evolution in Jesus of Islam understandings. For example, this methodology creates the opportunity for *nuzūl* 'Īsā to be an allegorical instead of physical event. If *nuzūl* 'Īsā is an allegorical event, it could be occurring now, which results in understandings of the Jesus of Islam that depart from formative-classical

understandings which I will identify and discuss later.³³³ There are major differences among Muslims and Christians in the specific details regarding the return of Jesus, but Saritoprak demonstrates that Muslims can have an enthusiasm for the person of Jesus and his eschatological accomplishments affording opportunities for efficacious discussions with Christians. These discussions can be centered on: a shared excitement for *nuzūl* ʿĪsā (because it could be happening now), an exchange of ideas regarding the accomplishments of ʿĪsā in his return, and consideration of various views within Christian and Muslim eschatology regarding literal or allegorical interpretations of Jesus' return.

³³³ Saritoprak, *Islam's Jesus*, 162. Saritoprak says, "Many Muslims believe Jesus has an angelic quality and can come and go without even being noticed." Therefore, if *nuzūl* ʿĪsā is an allegorical or spiritual event as Saritoprak interprets it, it could be happening now.

Chapter 4 - Ataie and Akyol

4.1 Ali Ataie

Ataie is Sunnī and a scholar of biblical hermeneutics with field specialties in Sacred Languages, Comparative Theology, and Comparative Literature.³³⁴ At Zaytuna College in Berkeley, California, Ataie has taught Arabic, Creedal Theology, Comparative Theology, Sciences of the Qur'an, Introduction to the Qur'an, and Seminal Ancient Texts. He received his BS in accounting from Cal Poly San Luis Obispo State University in 2000. In 2011, he received his MA in Biblical Studies from Pacific School of Religion. In 2016, he received his PhD in Cultural and Historical Studies in Religion from the Graduate Theological Union, the first Muslim seminarian in the 143-year history of the school. Ataie's PhD thesis, *Authenticating the Johannine Injil: Muslim 'Polemirenic' Interpretive Approaches to the Gospel of John*, is an exegesis of the Gospel of John in which the text is assumed to be the true Gospel of Jesus Christ mentioned in the Qur'an. Ataie is a native Persian speaker, and he can read and write Arabic, Hebrew, and Greek. Ataie joined the Zaytuna College faculty in 2012.³³⁵

I will examine Ataie's purpose for writing his thesis on the Gospel of John, introduce Ataie's understanding of the Johannine Gospel as being the true *Injil* of 'Īsā, demonstrate Ataie's proclivity to read John's Gospel through an Islamic lens, examine

³³⁴ Zaytuna College, "Ali Ataie," Accessed May 19, 2023. <https://zaytuna.edu/academics/faculty/ali-ataie>

³³⁵ Ibid.

Ataie's conclusions, and offer insights on the implications of Ataie's understandings for this research and Islam in general.

One of the reasons Ataie chose to exegete the Johannine Gospel for his thesis was the misunderstanding demonstrated by Aslan of this Gospel. Referring to Aslan's *Zealot* he says, "Aslan's portrayal of Jesus is spiritually anemic, and while it may be said that his work is polemirenic in the sense that it is academically rigorous, it is difficult to situate him within normative Muslim parameters."³³⁶ I will affirm that remaining within "normative Muslim parameters" is important to Ataie. He accuses Aslan of getting caught up in the Historical Jesus movement which he says attempts to reconstruct the Jesus of history through the tools of "modern biblical criticism and historiography" producing a "highly speculative creation," a figure the historian has made "in his own image," through "picking and choosing" scriptures from the Gospels; he specifically points out Aslan's rebuff of John's view that Jesus is an eternal being.³³⁷ Ataie, in his exegesis of the Johannine Gospel, will express his belief in the pre-temporal nature of 'Īsā (created before time as we know it), which he believes was John's intent in saying that Jesus is an "eternal being." Ataie criticizes Aslan because he does not properly exegete John's words.

There is an exchange of ideas occurring among American Muslim authors concerning the Jesus of Islam given the number of authors and diversity of opinions

³³⁶ Ataie, *Authenticating the Johannine Injil*, 21.

³³⁷ Ibid, 21-24. Ataie cites Aslan, *Zealot*, 28; regarding Jesus as an eternal being.

expressed in the primary source material. Ataie's effort to correct Aslan's "spiritually anemic" Jesus supports the idea that Ataie recognizes the need to correct unorthodox opinions and situate them within "normative Muslim parameters." But why choose the Gospel of John? Ataie opens his thesis with this question, "What exactly does a Muslim do with the New Testament, specifically the Gospel of John, the most Islamically 'problematic' of the canonical Gospels and simultaneously, the *ancora theologiae* of orthodox, that is to say Trinitarian Christianity?"³³⁸ Ataie identifies John's Gospel as the *theological anchor* of Christianity and the doctrine of the Triune Godhead. He adds, "I propose that the study of the New Testament is *essentially* Islamic, as Muslims must attempt to understand the *umam* (faith communities) of the past that set the stage, as it were, for the Revelation of Muhammad. Engaging in biblical studies/hermeneutics would substantially enhance Muslim understanding of the Qur'an itself when the latter engages intertextually with the biblical text, which happens quite often."³³⁹ It is foundational to Ataie's convictions that a rigorous study of New Testament texts can actually "enhance understanding" of Islamic Scripture. In his opening discourse he adds, "With respect specifically to the highly esoteric Gospel of John, it is my contention that rigorous academic Muslim engagement with the Johannine text would yield amazing faith-confirming results that demonstrate the Christological/theological claims of the

³³⁸ Ataie, *Authenticating the Johannine Injil*, 1.

³³⁹ *Ibid*, 4.

Qur'an."³⁴⁰ I can append these statements to Ataie's criticism of Aslan's understandings and propose that Ataie's thesis was a response to problematic theology being presented by Muslim authors, like Aslan. In addition, he chose to exegete John's Gospel, the most problematic Gospel to Islamic theology, and demonstrate its affirmation of Qur'anic Christological claims, i.e., reestablish John's Gospel within "normative Muslim parameters."

ʿĪsā was not only a prophet (*nabi*) but also one of twenty-five messengers (*rusul*) mentioned in the Qur'an. A *rasul* was a prophet who was given a message for the people they were sent to inform. ʿĪsā's message was the *Injīl*. Regarding ʿĪsā's *Injīl*, Ataie says, "The textual Jesus was the Messenger of Allah who delivered the Gospel to the people of Palestine some 2,000 years ago; the Gospel, or 'good news,' of a mystical teaching."³⁴¹ In other words, the Gospel is true Jewish mysticism; it is 'Jewish Sufism' as espoused by Jesus Christ and his Disciples and confirmed by Muhammad and his Companions."³⁴²

Ataie asserts that the Gospel of John and the three Synoptic Gospels are in fact the *Injīl* of ʿĪsā. He says, "When I speak of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, I am not referring to some now lost Gospel Archetype written in Syriac and in the style of the Qur'an. I am referring to the message of Christ, his actual teaching about God, his role as Christ, and the purpose of Law (Torah), that has been accurately preserved in the four canonical Gospels which the

³⁴⁰ Ibid, 6.

³⁴¹ Ibid, 35.

³⁴² Ibid, 82.

Qur'ān authenticates and calls 'the Injīl.'³⁴³ Ataie believes the Gospels to be the authentic words of Christ uncorrupted by centuries of transmission but improperly elucidated by Christian scholars.³⁴⁴ Ataie cites several scholars that he says contributed to his conclusion that the Gospels are the *Injīl* saying, "Interestingly, al-Mahalli and al-Suyuti in the commentary known as the *Jalālayn* mentions that all three of the above cited verses indicating *textual* corruption [Q 2:79, 3:78, & 4:43], applies to 'the Jews' and 'the Torah' and not the Christians and the *Injīl*."³⁴⁵ He also cites Ibrahim b. 'Umar al-Biqā'ī (d. 1480 CE) as saying that he believes Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John are the *Injīl*.³⁴⁶ The opinions of Ataie, al-Mahallī (d. 1460 CE), al-Suyūṭī (d. 1505 CE), and al-Biqā'ī are not necessarily a contradiction to the Qur'an, but they diverge from formative-classical understandings. According to Martin Whittingham, the Qur'an gives little indication of the content of the *Injīl*, however, what it does address shows some departure from the

³⁴³ Ibid, 57.

³⁴⁴ Ibid, 66. Also see Mustafa Akyol and Richard Shumack, "Unbelievable? The Jesus of Islam and Christianity: Can We Reconcile the Two?" (Premier Christian Radio, July 4, 2020), 32:35 - 33:03. Akyol also affirms the New Testament and recommends Muslims take it seriously without accepting its trinitarian theology. <https://www.premierchristianradio.com/Shows/Saturday/Unbelievable/Episodes/Unbelievable-The-Jesus-of-Islam-and-Christianity-Can-we-reconcile-the-two-Mustafa-Akyol-and-Richard-Shumack>. Also see Mark Beaumont, "Early Muslim Interpretation of the Gospels," *Transformation* 22, no. 1 (2005), 26. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43052633>. Beaumont says, "The earliest Muslim interpretations of the Gospels show agreement on appealing to the Gospels for evidence of the humanity of Jesus, but disagreement about the reliability of the Gospels' testimony."

³⁴⁵ *Al-Jalālayn*, Q 2:79, 3:78, & 4:43. Also see Jalāl al-Dīn al-Mahallī, and Ğalāl-ad-Dīn 'Abd-ar-Raḥmān Ibn-Abī-Bakr as-Suyūṭī, *Tafsīr Al-Jalālayn*, Translated by Feras Hamza, Great Commentaries on the Holy Qur'ān 1 (Louisville: Fons Vitae, 2008), 11, 57, 79. Also see Ataie, *Authenticating the Johannine Injil*, 3.

³⁴⁶ Walid A. Saleh and Kevin Casey, "An Islamic Diatessaron: Al-Biqā'ī's Harmony of the Four Gospels," in *Translating the Bible into Arabic: Historical, Text-Critical, and Literary Aspects*, Sara Binay and Stefan Leder, eds. (Beirut: DGIA, 2012), 87. Also see Ataie, *Authenticating the Johannine Injil*, 4.

New Testament Gospels.³⁴⁷ Ataie's exegesis of passages in John's Gospel, which he says are interpreted by Christian theologians to be demonstrative of the divinity of Christ, and his attempt to bring them into line with normative Islamic understandings will provide significant relevant insights. Later chapters will demonstrate Ataie's evolutions in understandings challenging formative-classical understandings.

Ataie's thesis accepts the Gospel of John "*a priori* deeming it to be the very Injil referenced time and again in the Qur'an."³⁴⁸ His exegesis of John's Gospel uses a "polemirenical approach" which he says, "stands between the extreme methods of the polemicists and irenicists [and is] characterized by academic sophistication and rigorous scholarship of the Bible, Christianity, biblical languages, and/or the historical critical method, and may include an attempt to harmonize the Christology of the Bible with the Qur'an, albeit under the framework of Islamic normativity."³⁴⁹ Before attempting to analyze the ideas Ataie will present from his exegesis of John's Gospel, it would be helpful to understand his use of the term "polemirenical". Therefore, understanding "polemicist," "irenicist," and his intent to "harmonize" the Bible and the Qur'an under the "framework of Islamic normativity," is required.

³⁴⁷ Martin Whittingham, *A History of Muslim Views of the Bible: The First Four Centuries*. Studies of the Bible and Its Reception 7 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020), 39.

³⁴⁸ Ataie, *Authenticating the Johannine Injil*, 126.

³⁴⁹ *Ibid*, 18.

Ataie attaches a negative connotation to the word “polemicist” when he says, “Most Muslim polemicists are not actually scholars of religion, they are often lay professional engineers, physicians, and lawyers ... and we often see that [they] have just enough knowledge and motivation to be dangerous, they tend to fall into the unfortunate abyss of misrepresentation.”³⁵⁰ Ataie accuses “irenics” of “blurring the boundaries between Islam and Christianity to the point of predicting that the two religions will eventually converge.”³⁵¹ Therefore, a “polemirenic approach” would avoid these two extremes and seek to use “academic sophistication and rigorous scholarship” to argue one’s position. A “polemirenic interpretive methodology” would “stand between” the uninformed lay polemicist who may misrepresent the truth and the irenicist who would so blur the boundaries between two positions as to bring them to convergence. The “polemirenic interpretive methodology,” as a middle way, would recognize the differences in the positions of the Bible and Qur’an and “harmonize” them under the “framework of Islamic normativity.”

Ataie’s aim is to exegete the Johannine Gospel within a framework of Islamic normativity. This is a bold admission by Ataie; to presuppose that the words of John support Islamic thought could hinder the discovery of alternative understandings that John may have intended. It will be demonstrated that Ataie’s tendency to interpret

³⁵⁰ Ibid, 13.

³⁵¹ Ibid, 39.

Biblical texts through an Islamic lens shapes his exegesis of the Gospel of John and his understandings of the Jesus of the Gospels. This needs to be considered as the understandings he presents of the Jesus of Islam from the Gospel of John are examined for departure from formative-classical understandings.

Ataie grapples with many verses in John's Gospel, especially those that Christians believe affirm the "Sonship" of Jesus as the divine Son of God, for the purpose of harmonizing them with Islamic normativity. Ataie's exegeses are intricate, introducing many presuppositions that must be valid to substantiate his conclusions, and it will be shown that he disregards the parsimony principle. This principle was articulated by Aristotle (d. 322 BCE) who wrote, "Let that demonstration be better which, other things being equal, depends on fewer postulates or suppositions or propositions."³⁵² Further, Ptolemy (d. 168 CE) said, "We consider it a good principle to explain the phenomena by the simplest hypothesis possible."³⁵³ The parsimony principle does not ensure truth, but an exegesis based on complex and lengthy presuppositions provides greater opportunity for error in understanding and therefore risks being less accurate than an interpretation with fewer assumptions. Ataie's lengthy hermeneutical extrapolations of what some scholars believe to be self-explanatory texts cast doubt on his objectivity and diminish his

³⁵² Aristotle, *Complete Works of Aristotle, Volume 1: The Revised Oxford Translation* (Princeton University Press, 2014), 141.

³⁵³ Claudius Ptolemaeus, *Ptolemy's Almagest*, Edited by Gerald J. Toomer (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 136.

readers' confidence in his conclusions. It is relevant to demonstrate Ataie's method of exegesis of a Johannine passage.

The following example is not to argue for the deity of Christ but to demonstrate Ataie's approach to exegesis and his elaborate sequence of controlling assumptions. For Christians, one of the most explicit statements in John's Gospel regarding the divine nature of Jesus is John 1:1. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." The text identifies the "Word" as "God," not "a god" or some other connotation. Ataie's exegesis of this passage is rather different:

John 1:1 [explains] the Logos as being analogous to 'the Son;' it, or rather he, is personal and non-eternal, yet pre-temporal (as we know time) and created. The Father is the only one called by the arthrous 'God' in John 1:1 thus He is alone 'the very God,' while the Logos (Son) is 'a god,' or a 'divine,' meaning 'godlike, lordly, divinized.' Eventually, by God's permission, the Logos (the Messianic light/soul) 'incarnated' and dwelt among us (John 1:14.1.5) as Jesus of Nazareth, the Messenger of God, some 2,000 years ago.³⁵⁴

Using Ataie's exegesis, John 1:1 can be reconstructed as follows: In the beginning was the created Son [Ataie capitalizes 'Son' but later will drop the capitals as saying, 'a god,' 'godlike,' 'lordly,' or 'divinized'] and the created 'godlike' being was with God, and this being was 'lordly' or 'divinized.'

First, Ataie assumes "In the beginning was the Word" does not imply "eternal." He does not consider Genesis 1:1 which states, "In the beginning, God." Using Ataie's argument, the eternal nature of God could be questioned. Second, Ataie assumes that

³⁵⁴ Ataie, *Authenticating the Johannine Injil*, 133.

because the word “God” is stated in John 1:1 specifically, it must refer to the “Father” and therefore any other beings in this passage cannot be God in any sense. This is an example of imposing “Islamic normativity” on a passage without considering what the author may be saying. Third, Ataie says the Logos is the manifestation of God’s fiat “Let there be light.” But John says in verse 3, “All things came into existence through him [the Logos].” John does not think the ‘Word,’ Christ, was created as part of this command (Let there be light). Lastly, Ataie says, “John 1:1 reads, ‘And divine (lit. a god) was the word,’ with no definite article before *theos*, hence my translation ‘divine.’” John was clear that the Word was God, not a god. Ataie appeals to “Greek grammarians” who state that the context determines the phrase as saying Christ is ‘God’s shadow’ walking upon the earth, a human reflection of the divine attributes, ‘the image of the invisible God.’ Ken Boa, a theologian and “Greek grammarian” disagrees. Ataie has invoked a Pauline epistle, Colossians 1:15, and suggests the Greek translation of the phrase “image of the invisible God” should be applied to the passage in John 1:1. Regarding Colossians 1:15, Boa says, “Christ, the visible expression of the invisible God, came to disclose the heart, the essence, and the being of the eternal God in the clearest way of all—personal revelation.”³⁵⁵ If Paul’s statement applies to John 1:1, Boa believes Christ was the

³⁵⁵ Kenneth Boa, *Conformed to His Image, Revised Edition Biblical, Practical Approaches to Spiritual Formation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2020), 432.

“essence” of God in a “personal revelation” through his interpretation of the Greek text relating to “the image of the invisible God.”³⁵⁶

All the suppositions, linguistic applications, references to other biblical texts, and application of external scholars and ‘grammarians’ above must be correct for Ataie’s exegesis to have credibility. The parsimony principle suggests Ataie’s interpretation to be tenuous. Ataie accuses the Historical Jesus movement “historians” of “picking and choosing” the Jesus they want from the Gospels and making Jesus in their own image. This analysis of John 1:1 was not intended to resolve the meaning of the text. It was to demonstrate Ataie’s predisposition to exegete Johannine texts, so they conform to Islamic normativity [making Jesus in Islam’s own image], and to underscore his extensive use of presuppositions which diminish his readers’ confidence in his conclusions.

I have examined Ataie’s purpose for writing his thesis on the Gospel of John and introduced Ataie’s understanding of the Gospel of John to be the true *Injīl* of ‘Īsā. I have discussed Ataie’s proclivity to read John’s Gospel through an Islamic lens and suggested that this can diminish the credibility of his conclusions. Ataie’s method for extracting from the Johannine text understandings of the Jesus of Islam, and whether those understandings demonstrate evolutions in understandings of the Jesus of Islam from formative-classical understandings are relevant, regardless of their veracity.

³⁵⁶ Ataie, *Authenticating the Johannine Injil*, 127-133.

It appears that Ataie's preferred method of communicating his ideas to Muslims today is video. He has produced many YouTube and other video presentations providing opportunities for him to speak on a variety of topics. One of his video series is titled "Lessons from the Life of the Prophet Jesus."³⁵⁷ Because these were made in 2015, one year before his published thesis, one would assume they represent his understandings as recorded in the thesis and would be redundant as a source to review. However, I found them to be an affirmation of formative-classical understandings, which are quite different from the views in his thesis which will be discussed later. If one had viewed the videos before reading the thesis, one might think no new understandings of the Jesus of Islam would be forthcoming in the thesis. However, as the subsequent chapters will reveal, Ataie demonstrates a considerable shift in understandings of the Jesus of Islam; understandings that may cause concern for some Muslim readers. Either his videos, "Lessons from the Life of the Prophet Jesus," were intended to moderate the impact of the understandings of the Jesus of Islam to be presented in his thesis, or his understandings were altered after the videos during the composition of his thesis.

4.2 Mustafa Akyol

³⁵⁷ Ali Ataie, *Lessons from the Life of Prophet Jesus - Ustadh Ali Ataie*, 2015.
<https://lamppostedu.org/lessons-from-the-life-of-prophet-jesus-ustadh-ali-ataie>.

Akyol is a Turkish author who writes in English and is widely read in America. His book *The Islamic Jesus: How the King of the Jews Became a Prophet of the Muslims* has received praise from *The New York Times*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Publisher's Weekly*, *The Economist*, *The National Catholic Reporter*, and more.³⁵⁸ *The Financial Times* identifies Akyol not as Sunnī or Shi'a but as "a devout but liberal Muslim;" a label Akyol accepts.³⁵⁹ In 2017, Akyol joined The Freedom Project at Wellesley College in the USA as a senior visiting fellow. In 2018, he joined the Cato Institute in Washington D.C. as a Senior Fellow.

This section presents Akyol's ideas regarding the Jesus of Islam and identifies the reform he wishes Islam to embrace. I will identify a presupposition that shapes his ideas, note his disregard for differing opinions, and conclude with one of Akyol's critics providing reasons to expect arguments from Akyol that are both "fascinating and persuasive" though they sound "contestable" if not "controversial."³⁶⁰

What is the nature of the reform Akyol desires of Islam? Akyol says that Arnold Toynbee (d. 1975 CE) was one of the first to note the similarity between Muslims living in

³⁵⁸ Mustafa Akyol, "Bio (in English)." Accessed May 19, 2023. <http://www.mustafaakyol.org/index.php/about/a-short-bio>

³⁵⁹ Mustafa Akyol, "Mustafa Akyol CV," n.d. <http://mustafaakyol.org/images/downloads/mustafa-akyol-cv-2017.pdf>; Also see Mustafa Akyol, *Islam without Extremes: A Muslim Case for Liberty* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2011), 38. Aslan identifies with the label "liberal" as he says that he identifies with modern-day Turkey because, "I am a part of that story [modern Turkey], an exceptional story which is largely unnoticed in the West and represents a growing synthesis of Islam and liberalism."

³⁶⁰ Farah Adeed, "Can Islam Be Liberal? Review of 'Reopening Muslim Minds.'" *Global Village Space*, August 13, 2021.

a world dominated by the West and the Jews living in the Roman world.³⁶¹ Akyol says “Muslims are not living in the context of seventh-century Mecca and Medina ... we are rather living in the context of first-century Nazareth and Jerusalem.”³⁶² He gives a reason for writing *The Islamic Jesus*, “Therefore, we need a ‘prophetic example’ fit for the first-century drama. We need the method, and the message, of Jesus ... whose very ‘return’ is promised in our tradition.”³⁶³ Akyol asserts that Islam’s only hope for reform, to make Islam relevant to modernity and bring the Caliphate to the waiting world, is the reformer they share with the other Abrahamic religions, Jesus of Nazareth (ʿĪsā).

To support his premise that the Jesus of Nazareth is the ‘prophetic example’ for today, Akyol offers several ideas that venerate the prophet ʿĪsā and challenge Islamic orthodoxy. First, ʿĪsā, while not divine as Christians believe, was still “sinless and powerful ... somewhere between human beings and God ... one could suggest on the same level as angels.”³⁶⁴ Second, ʿĪsā’s eschatological role is exceptional, demonstrating that he is a prophet of “great power and glory.”³⁶⁵ Third, while the Qur’an mentions the flaws of the

³⁶¹ Arnold J. Toynbee, *Civilization on Trial* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1948), 181; Specifically, Toynbee says, “We may infer that as the Romans overthrew the Jewish ‘Zealots’ in the first and second century of the Christian era, so some great power of the Western world of today - let us say the United States - could overthrow the Wahhābīs now anytime it chose.” Akyol comments in *The Islamic Jesus*, 198.

³⁶² Akyol, *The Islamic Jesus*, 203.

³⁶³ Ibid.

³⁶⁴ Ibid, 17, 165.

³⁶⁵ Ibid, 42.

other prophets, ʿĪsā “has no *zalla*, no mistake, no lapse. He is simply flawless.”³⁶⁶ Fourth, ʿĪsā “was the Word of God in a higher sense than the mere ‘creative Word,’ [he] was a perfect man in union with God.”³⁶⁷ Fifth, the Christian Gospels may be trusted to inform us of ʿĪsā and his teachings because “Jews and Christians ‘corrupted’ the interpretation of their scriptures, not their texts.”³⁶⁸ Lastly, ʿĪsā brings the Muslim world a new perspective on setting up the Kingdom of God (Caliphate) because “it is possible for Muslims to think ... that the Caliphate is not here or there, but within themselves.”³⁶⁹ Each of these ideas will be discussed in later chapters in the context of the theme or themes they support and their variances relative to formative-classical understandings will be discussed according to classification.

Akyol’s objective is that the ideas above will endear Muslims to the person and teachings of the Jesus of Islam which will result in the belated reform of Islam that he

³⁶⁶ Ibid, 163. Akyol says, Adam ate the fruit of the forbidden tree, Moses hit a man and killed him, and Muhammad neglected a blind man searching for wisdom, which led to his censure by the Qur’an. He adds, “The admonition of Muhammad for neglecting a blind man searching for wisdom is placed in the beginning of the Qur’anic chapter ‘Abasa’ or ‘He Frowned,’ whose very title comes from this episode. For the sins of other prophets in the Qur’an, there are Adam (7:23), Abraham (26:82), Moses (28:16), Jonah (37:142), and Muhammad himself (47:19 and 48:2).” He leaves the reader to conclude that ʿĪsā is unique in this regard from his perspective.

³⁶⁷ Ibid, 164. Akyol quotes Muslim commentators Ibn ʿAbbās, cousin of the Prophet, and Nishapuri, a Persian Shi’a scholar of the fourteenth century as support for this statement.

³⁶⁸ Akyol, *The Islamic Jesus*, 20. Akyol makes no further mention of other understandings regarding corruption of Jewish and Christian Scripture. He appears to embrace Egyptian scholar Muhammad ʿAbduh’s (d. 1905 CE) understanding. Also see Simon Wood, *Christian Criticism, Islamic Proofs, Rashīd Ridā’s Modernist Defense of Islam* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2012), 25. ʿAbduh is quoted by Wood as saying, “the issue is corruption of meaning, not corruption of text.” ʿAbduh’s views are in *Islam and Christianity between Science and Civilization* and the Qur’anic commentary *Tafsīr al-Manār*, which he wrote with Riḍā. Both were first serialized in *al-Manār* (according to Wood).

³⁶⁹ Ibid, 210.

asserts is ultimately desired by many Muslims as indicated by their expectation of ʿĪsā’s imminent return, *nuzūl* ʿĪsā.³⁷⁰ Akyol describes the “reform” to which he refers, paraphrasing ʿAbbās Maḥmūd al-ʿAqqād (d. 1964): “Reform toward reason, free will, and spirituality rather than legalism.”³⁷¹ The “legalism” to which Akyol refers can be understood by the way in which he answers the question, “Should Muslims obey anybody?” He cites Qur’an 4:59 which says, “Obey God and the Messenger, and those in authority among you.” However, he says that today [because of legalism], no Muslim can bring a dispute to ‘God and the Messenger’ in any way, yet the Qur’an and the hadiths can never directly address our current reality, and likewise, there is no one whom the Prophet may appoint as ‘those in authority among you.’ He concludes, “There are no such people whom Muslims must religiously ‘obey,’ verse 4:59 isn’t applicable today.”³⁷²

Regarding Akyol’s “reform” Reynolds says, “Akyol laments that three types of freedom are regularly restricted in the Islamic world: moral and ethical freedom, freedom of religion, and freedom of speech.”³⁷³ The reform proposed by Akyol moves Islam away

³⁷⁰ Ibid, 184. Akyol bases his assumption on a 2012 poll conducted by the Washington-based Pew Research Center that showed roughly half of the populations in twenty-two Muslim-majority countries believe not only that Jesus will return, but also that his return is “imminent”—that it will happen in their lifetime. Also see Pew Research Center’s Religion & Public Life Project. “The World’s Muslims: Unity and Diversity,” August 9, 2012, 58, 66.

³⁷¹ Ibid, 206. Akyol does not cite his source. Also see Mustafa Akyol, *Reopening Muslim Minds: A Return to Reason, Freedom, and Tolerance* (New York: St. Martin’s Essentials, 2021), 234. Akyol says, “I think it is time for us to begin thinking anew ... to reopen our minds ... to embrace more reason, freedom, and tolerance.”

³⁷² Mustafa Akyol, *Why, as a Muslim, I Defend Liberty* (Washington, DC: Cato Institute, 2021), 80-81.

³⁷³ Gabriel Said Reynolds, “Liberal Islam | Gabriel Said Reynolds.” *First Things*. Accessed June 8, 2022. <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2022/03/liberal-islam>.

from legalism, restricted freedoms of religion and speech, and towards the free exercise of reason, free will and religious practice. Akyol says, “The Mu‘tazila vision is important, for it reminds us that God blessed us with not just revelation but also reason.”³⁷⁴ He says Mu‘tazila scholars offered a systematic theology that upheld human freedom and reason.³⁷⁵ Akyol’s reasoning leads him to look at the state of Islam in the world today and close his book with these words, “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.”³⁷⁶ Akyol’s “reforms” and the “grim malaise” they will alleviate will be discussed in the following chapters.

It was discussed earlier that Aslan respected James’ leadership among early Christians: similarly, a significant presupposition that shapes Akyol’s ideas is his belief that Jewish Christians, probably led by James the brother of Jesus, represented the true teachings of Jesus which was “not a new religion but an update of Judaism.”³⁷⁷ He says he first encountered this idea when reading James’ epistle, “and there is nothing in it

³⁷⁴ Akyol, *Reopening Muslim Minds: A Return to Reason, Freedom, and Tolerance*, 232.

³⁷⁵ *Ibid*, 18.

³⁷⁶ Akyol, *The Islamic Jesus*, 215. Also see Mustafa Akyol, *Islam without Extremes: A Muslim Case for Liberty*, 1st edition. (New York: W.W. Norton, 2011), 190. Akyol describes “grim malaise:” “For a conservative Muslim living in the late 1920s, the world must have looked grim. The Ottoman caliphate was destroyed, and most Muslim peoples had become slaves to European or, worse, Communist rulers. The few independent nations, such as Turkey and Iran, were overtaken by authoritarian regimes that suppressed the faith of their own people.” Akyol has seen little change since this time to change his perspective of Islam in the world.

³⁷⁷ *Ibid*, 35.

which says that Jesus is the Son of God.”³⁷⁸ He quotes James Tabor who says, “there are two completely separate and distinct Christianities embedded in the New Testament ... [one championed by Paul and the other by James].”³⁷⁹ Akyol paraphrases Kenneth Carroll (d. 2010 CE) as saying with the possible exception that he was the Messiah, the religious teachings of Jesus were primarily the beliefs of Orthodox Jews like James in the first century.³⁸⁰ Akyol interprets the book of Acts as a book of “tension with the ‘Judaizers’ – Jews who believed Jesus to be the Messiah but also honored the Mosaic Law.”³⁸¹ He finds affirmation in the works of Ferdinand Christian Baur (d. 1860 CE) who suggested that Paul’s teachings were controversial to the Jerusalem Christians.³⁸² Akyol paraphrases Richard N. Longenecker (d. 2021 CE), “The more Christianity moved away from its Jewish roots and planted itself on Hellenistic soil, the more it perceived Jesus as divine.”³⁸³ Akyol quotes James Dunn, “The heretical Jewish Christianity of the later centuries could quite properly claim to be more truly the heir of earliest Christianity than any other expression

³⁷⁸ Ibid, 3.

³⁷⁹ James Tabor, *The Jesus Dynasty: The Hidden History of Jesus, His Royal Family, and the Birth of Christianity* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2006), 336; Akyol comments in *The Islamic Jesus*, 5.

³⁸⁰ Kenneth L. Carroll, “The Place of James in the Early Church” in: *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* Volume 44 Issue 1 (1961), 52-53. Also see Akyol, *The Islamic Jesus*, 35.

³⁸¹ Akyol, *The Islamic Jesus*, 39.

³⁸² Ferdinand Christian Baur, *Paul, the Apostle of Jesus Christ: His Life and Works, His Epistles and Teachings: A Contribution to a Critical History of Primitive Christianity*, Vol. 1. (London: Williams and Norgate, 1875), chapter 5. Also see Akyol, *The Islamic Jesus*, 39.

³⁸³ Akyol, *The Islamic Jesus*, 47. Akyol paraphrase is from Richard N. Longenecker, *The Christology of Early Jewish Christianity* (Naperville: Alec R. Allenson, 1970), 151.

of Christianity.”³⁸⁴ Akyol concludes, “In their time [Christianity of later centuries] Pauline Christianity had developed into an unmistakably un-Jewish faith.”³⁸⁵

Akyol continues as saying that these early Jewish Christians were not thought likely to endure by the Romans, the Gentile Christians or the Jews and became “increasingly marginal and finally mute” until they had all but vanished by the end of the fifth century CE.³⁸⁶ But the question of Jewish Christianity is significantly contested. Joan Taylor says, “Jewish-Christians [were] marginalised, accepted neither by church nor by synagogue, because they intended to be both Jewish and Christian at one and the same time.”³⁸⁷ While both Akyol and Taylor agree that Jewish Christians were marginalized in their time, Taylor has a different view of “Jewish-Christians” than Akyol; she adds the hyphen between the words “Jewish” and “Christian” to distinguish her interpretation. She relies on R.E. Brown (d. 1998 CE) who argues that “during most of the first century a theological distinction signaled by ‘Jewish Christianity’ and ‘Gentile Christianity’ is imprecise and poorly designated.”³⁸⁸ Brown suggests four different types of Christianity

³⁸⁴ James D. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament: An Inquiry into the Character of Earliest Christianity*, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1977), 244. Also see Akyol, *The Islamic Jesus*, 56.

³⁸⁵ Akyol, *The Islamic Jesus*, 56.

³⁸⁶ *Ibid*, 57.

³⁸⁷ Joan E. Taylor, “The Phenomenon of Early Jewish-Christianity: Reality or Scholarly Invention?” *Vigiliae Christianae* 44, no. 4 (1990), 313.

³⁸⁸ Raymond E. Brown, “Not Jewish Christianity and Gentile Christianity but Types of Jewish/Gentile Christianity,” *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 45, no. 1 (1983), 75. Also see Raymond E. Brown and John P. Meier, *Antioch and Rome: New Testament Cradles of Catholic Christianity*. (New York: Paulist Press, 1983), 1-9; Brown and Meier delineate four predominant types of “Jewish/Gentile Christianity” of which only one was strictly Pauline; yet all embraced the salvific nature of Christ’s work. Brown and Meier’s argument is that this demonstrates that Paul had influence upon early Christian theology but was not the sole author of

emerged in the days of the early church but the distinction between them did not involve the salvific nature of Christ's work but in what way the Jewish laws and feasts should be kept in support or honor of Christ's work.³⁸⁹ He concludes by saying, "In light of this classification [the four types of early Christianity] the reader can see why I regard it as theologically meaningless to be told that at Rome Jewish Christianity was replaced or outnumbered by Gentile Christianity, so that there was friction."³⁹⁰ Taylor paraphrases Brown as saying, "Jewish culture and Hellenistic culture were not mutually exclusive milieux, and consequently a distinction between a Jewish and a Gentile Christianity on cultural, or even theological, terms is a false one."³⁹¹ Taylor describes Jewish-Christians as people who "are both Jewish and Christian ... at the same time," and any attempt to distinguish Jewish Christianity from Gentile Christianity "is a false one." Akyol's view is that Jewish Christians were Orthodox Jews in the first century who had come to see Jesus as the Messiah but not the Son of God.³⁹² Akyol's understanding of Jewish Christianity is based on a debatable understanding of a term contested by Taylor and Brown.³⁹³

salvation through faith in Christ. I.e., there were not two different types of Christianity, "Jewish Christianity" and Gentile Christianity (Paul's Christology), but four types of "Jewish/Gentile Christianity" which shared belief in salvation through faith in Christ but differed on observance of Jewish laws, customs, and feasts.

³⁸⁹ Ibid, 77-78.

³⁹⁰ Ibid, 78.

³⁹¹ Taylor, "The Phenomenon of Early Jewish-Christianity: Reality or Scholarly Invention," 314.

³⁹² Carroll, "The Place of James in the Early Church," 52-53. Also see Akyol, *The Islamic Jesus*, 35.

³⁹³ Also see Andrew Loke, *The Origin of Divine Christology*, Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series, Volume 169, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 47. Loke offers three arguments to establish that Jesus was considered divine in the earliest Christology: First, 1 Cor. 8: 6 and Phil. 2: 6-11 indicate that Christ was regarded as a personal, pre-existent and truly divine being, who was already within the being of YHWH prior to the creation of all things and was a different person from God the Father, while

With his understanding, Akyol contends that Islam is the rebirth of Jewish Christianity as it pertains to the Jesus of Islam.³⁹⁴ He quotes Bart D. Ehrman, “In early Christianity, the views of Christ got ‘higher and higher’ with the passing of time, as he became increasingly identified as divine.”³⁹⁵ Akyol says that Pauline Christians came to explain the “heretical” views of the Jewish Christians of the second, third and fourth century as the “re-Judaization” theory.³⁹⁶ Akyol acknowledges that not all scholars would agree with his presupposition or Ehrman’s comment, but he does not offer their objections to the ideas of those he cites.³⁹⁷ There are scholars who disagree with Akyol regarding Paul’s aberrant teachings. David Wenham, and Larry Hurtado (d. 2019 CE) defend Paul’s teachings as those of Jesus and early Christian leaders, both Gentiles and Jews.³⁹⁸ Other scholars, including Wenham, suggest that the term “Jewish Christianity” is

at the same time was truly human as well; second, certain devotional practices offered to Jesus in corporate liturgical gatherings indicate the worship of Jesus; and third, a number of earliest Christian writings reflect a spiritual desire for Christ which was reserved for YHWH alone.

³⁹⁴ Akyol, *The Islamic Jesus*, 58.

³⁹⁵ Bart D. Ehrman, *How Jesus Became God: The Exaltation of a Jewish Preacher from Galilee*, First edition (New York: HarperOne, 2014), 345.

³⁹⁶ Akyol, *The Islamic Jesus*, 56.

³⁹⁷ *Ibid*, 49.

³⁹⁸ David Wenham, *Paul and Jesus: The True Story* (Grand Rapids: William W. Eerdmans Pub, 2002) and *Did St Paul Get Jesus Right? The Gospel According to Paul* (Oxford: Lion, 2010); and Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity*. These works express continuity of teaching amongst the early Christian leaders regarding the divinity of Christ. Wenham says, “The picture that emerges [after reviewing Paul’s letters] is that Paul probably knew much of what we know of Jesus from the Gospels ... the traditions of Jesus seem to be important on just about every topic Paul discusses ... the story and sayings of Jesus were foundational for him and his teaching” (Wenham, *Paul and Jesus*, 182). According to Hurtado, the veneration of Jesus and devotion to him began the first two decades of the Christian movement and was “exhibiting signs of routinization” by the time of Paul’s letters, i.e., 50 CE (Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity*, 7).

only a modern convention used to specify a type of Christianity that never existed.³⁹⁹

Daniel Boyarin (b. 1946 CE) says, “I propose that any definition of ‘Jewish Christianity’ implies an entire theory of the development of early Christianity and Judaism [and] virtually precludes, in my opinion, any continued scholarly usefulness for the term.”⁴⁰⁰

According to Taylor, the concept of “Jewish Christianity” is a relatively modern one, coming into existence about one hundred sixty years ago.⁴⁰¹ And Wenham says, “The evidence does not point to the controversy [over the divinity of Jesus] being acute among Jewish Christians in the very earliest days of the church, let alone to Paul being a key figure in that controversy. The evidence of John, and probably of Paul’s letter to the Colossians, suggests that this became an issue later rather than earlier, and in the Greek world rather than among Jewish Christians.”⁴⁰² Scholars disagree with Akyol’s premise that Jewish Christianity was the first and true form of Christianity later distorted by Paul’s teachings, but this presupposition shapes Akyol’s ideas and understandings of the Jesus of Islam.⁴⁰³

³⁹⁹ Daniel Boyarin, “Rethinking Jewish Christianity: An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category.” *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 99, no. No. 1 Winter (2009), 7–36; Joan E. Taylor “The Phenomenon of Early Jewish-Christianity: Reality or Scholarly Invention?” *Vigiliae Christianae* 44, no. 4 (1990), 313–34; David Wenham, *Did St Paul Get Jesus Right? The Gospel According to Paul* (Oxford: Lion, 2010), 132.

⁴⁰⁰ Boyarin, “Rethinking Jewish Christianity: An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category,” 7–8.

⁴⁰¹ Taylor, “The Phenomenon of Early Jewish-Christianity: Reality or Scholarly Invention?” 314.

⁴⁰² Wenham, *Did St Paul Get Jesus Right*, 132.

⁴⁰³ Larry W. Hurtado, *Honoring the Son: Jesus in Earliest Christian Devotional Practice*, edited by Michael F. Bird (Bellingham: Lexham Press, 2018), 7. Hurtado says, “Early Christianity was distinct from other religions by a constellation of devotional practices that featured Jesus as the rightful recipient. It was distinct from Judaism because it included the risen Jesus as a recipient of worship along with God.”

To further support his premise that Jewish Christianity was not Paul's Christianity, Akyol refers to "*The Pseudo-Clementine Writings*" which he says is a Jewish Christian source written a few centuries after the end of the first century CE.⁴⁰⁴ These writings are presumed to be the discourses of St. Peter as collected by one called "Clement" and are of interest to Akyol because he argues they affirm "a deepening gap between Pauline and Jewish Christianities."⁴⁰⁵ Nicole Kelly affirms Akyol's dating but also suggests they could be as early as the first and second century. She says, "There was plenty of literature on hypothetical first- and second-century sources that were thought to lie behind the texts, but remarkably little investigation of the fourth-century Homilies and Recognitions."⁴⁰⁶ The writings include four groupings, the *Homilies* recounting the life of Clement at Rome, the *Recognitions* recounting the life of Clement, the *Introductory Writings* including two letters addressed to James, and the *Epitomies* which is a summary of the first two writings.⁴⁰⁷ Akyol believes these writings affirm his assertion that Jewish Christianity did not represent Pauline Christianity. Amongst the Pseudo-Clementine writings, Akyol identifies the *Kerygmata Petrou* or "Preaching of Peter" to be of particular interest. This is a letter presumed to be written by the Apostle Peter to James the Just, the brother of

⁴⁰⁴ Akyol, *The Islamic Jesus*, 54. Akyol places the *Didache* at the end of the first century and says the Pseudo-Clementine writings were written three centuries later.

⁴⁰⁵ Akyol, *The Islamic Jesus*, 55.

⁴⁰⁶ Nicole Kelly, *Knowledge and Religious Authority in the Pseudo-Clementines: Situating the Recognitions in Fourth-Century Syria* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006), VIII.

⁴⁰⁷ Edwin Keith Broadhead, *Jewish Ways of Following Jesus: Redrawing the Religious Map of Antiquity*, *Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen Zum Neuen Testament* 266 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 267-8.

Jesus who was the leader of the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem. Akyol believes this document “echoes an acute tension” between the Paulines and the “Judaizers,” early Jewish Christians in Jerusalem.⁴⁰⁸

There are scholars who demonstrate skepticism towards these documents. Edwin Broadhead agrees that some of the texts, specifically *Recognitions* 1:27-71, appear to affirm “some form of Jewish Christianity between the late 2nd or 3rd Century.” Graham Stanton (d. 2009 CE) identifies four basic problems that make critical analysis of this material difficult.⁴⁰⁹ It is outside my focus to analyze Stanton’s four basic problems; however, his conclusion is relevant as he says the evidence of how Pseudo-Clementine writings relate to Jewish Christianity “is complex and must be treated with due caution and rigor.”⁴¹⁰ F. Stanley Jones says some scholars argue that the Jewish Christian elements of the Pseudo-Clementine writings are early and support the premise that Jewish Christianity played an important role in the development of Christianity, others argue for a late date which diminishes Jewish Christian content.⁴¹¹ Both the content and dating of these writings appear to be debated amongst scholars. It appears the value of the Pseudo-Clementine Writings to one’s perspective on the development of Christianity

⁴⁰⁸ Akyol, *The Islamic Jesus*, 55.

⁴⁰⁹ Graham Stanton, “Jewish Christian Elements in the Pseudo-Clementine Writings,” in *Jewish Believers in Jesus: The Early Centuries*, eds. Oskar Skarsaune and Reidar Hvalvik (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2007), 305.

⁴¹⁰ *Ibid*, 323.

⁴¹¹ F. Stanley Jones, “The Pseudo-Clementines: A History of Research, Part I.” *The Second Century: A Journal of Early Christian Studies* 2, no. Spring (1982), 8-14.

depends on the understandings one may hold of “Jewish Christianity,” which was demonstrated in Akyol’s and Taylor’s understandings above. Akyol’s understandings of Jewish Christianity, Pseudo-Clementine Writings and Pauline Christianity as a distortion of Jewish Christianity, are based on contested foundations which shape his ideas and understandings of the Jesus of Islam.

To demonstrate Akyol’s disregard for differing opinions upon his conclusions, I will consider four examples. First is his explanation of two miracles of Jesus where Jesus says to those he healed, “your faith has made you well.”⁴¹² Akyol adds, “For both Jesus and his people, there was only one valid faith, the faith of their father Abraham, which we commonly know today as Judaism. Jesus was a prophetic voice within this Judaic tradition, not outside of it.”⁴¹³ Akyol credits faith in God [the God of Abraham] and not faith in Jesus as the explanation for the miracles of healing described above. Other scholars offer different understandings. Werner Kahl uses the term “bearer of numinous power” to describe a person who has inherent healing power.⁴¹⁴ Eric Eve applies this term to both Yahweh in the Old Testament and Jesus in the Gospels.⁴¹⁵ It is beyond my scope to discuss the arguments for the divinity of Christ, but Akyol could have offered the

⁴¹² Mark 10:52, Matthew 9:22.

⁴¹³ Akyol, *The Islamic Jesus*, 22.

⁴¹⁴ Werner Kahl, *New Testament Miracle Stories in Their Religious-Historical Setting [i.e., Setting]: A Religionsgeschichtliche Comparison from a Structural Perspective*, *Forschungen Zur Religion Und Literatur Des Alten Und Neuen Testaments*, 163, Heft, (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1994), 74.

⁴¹⁵ Eric Eve, *The Jewish Context of Jesus’ Miracles*, JSNTSup 231 (London and New York: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 15,16.

possibility that those healed were putting their faith in Jesus as the source of power for their healing, which would have required examining the text from a different point of view.

Second, like Aslan, Akyol admires James the brother of Jesus. He titles his Introduction “Meeting James” and points to James’ emphasis on good deeds to secure favor with God. Like Aslan, he sees Jewish Christianity, which he believes is advocated by James, as the true Christianity and the Christianity that developed under the writings and teachings of Paul as the corruption of Jewish Christianity. And like Aslan, Akyol makes no comment about the opening statement of James’ epistle, “James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ.”⁴¹⁶ The Christian claim that Christ is one of three persons within one divine nature, that God is a triunity, is outside the focus of this introduction, but Akyol avoids any discussion of James’ description of Jesus as “the Lord Jesus Christ.”

Third, Akyol says of the Christian doctrine of original sin, “Similarly, neither Judaism nor Islam accepts the doctrine of original sin and the related notion of redemption. In both religions, humans just have to ask forgiveness from God for their individual sins—not seek atonement for some inherent guilt that they carry as Adam’s children.”⁴¹⁷ Akyol’s understanding of the “doctrine of original sin” demonstrates a misunderstanding that “original sin” is about “some inherent guilt” one carries as a

⁴¹⁶ James 1:1.

⁴¹⁷ Akyol, *The Islamic Jesus*, 75.

descendant of Adam. William Temple says it is not about inherited guilt but an inherited sin nature, a predisposition towards “self-centeredness;” doing what is pleasing to self rather than what pleases God.⁴¹⁸ According to Boa, “Because of their rebellion against God, humans ... suffered spiritual death ... their spirits were cut off from God [and] when their spirits died, their sin nature was born, and their minds, emotions, and wills came under the dominion of sin with all its distorting effects.”⁴¹⁹ The “doctrine of original sin” is about an inherited “sin nature;” our wills coming “under the dominion of sin with all its distorting effects.” According to the understandings of Temple and Boa, there is a significant difference between guilt and sinful nature because guilt is a symptom and one’s sinful nature is the disease. Akyol proposes forgiveness can relieve guilt, but Temple and Boa suggest the sin nature would remain. The Christian doctrine of redemption teaches that one needs relief from one’s sin nature, not “inherited guilt,” as stated by Akyol.

And fourth, regarding Jesus’ question “Who do you say I am?” Akyol offers, “Surely, there were differences between various Jewish groups in the exact definition of the Messiah, but none of them perceived him as a divine being ... [or] thought of the Messiah as a divine being—a God, or God the Son, as Christianity would later define its

⁴¹⁸ William Temple, *Readings in St John’s Gospel: First and Second Series* (London: Pendlebury Press Limited, 1945), xxiv.

⁴¹⁹ Boa, *Conformed to His Image*, 97.

notion of Christ."⁴²⁰ He would be correct as saying that *many* of the Jews did not think the Messiah would be a divine being. But his use of absolutes like *none* ignores numerous times in the New Testament where Jesus received worship from Jews.⁴²¹ Bowman and Komoszewski say that the Bible teaches us to worship Jesus and they quote New Testament scholar R. T. France, "The basic fact which lies behind all the theological terms and titles is the worship of the carpenter [Jesus]."⁴²² Akyol's choice of words, "none" over "many," demonstrates his tendency to claim too much. Akyol ignores Jesus' accusations against the leading Jewish scholars of the day when he said to them, "You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me yet you refuse to come to me to have life ... your accuser is Moses, on whom your hopes are set. If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me."⁴²³ How does the Scripture testify about Jesus, and how is it Moses wrote about him?⁴²⁴ Akyol does not discuss these statements by Jesus to offer them as possible sources of the belief in Jesus' divinity by his followers.

⁴²⁰ Mark 8:27-31; Akyol, *The Islamic Jesus*, 27.

⁴²¹ Mark 5:6; Luke 24:52; John 9:38; Matthew 8:2; 9:18; 14:33; 15:25, and others.

⁴²² Bowman and Komoszewski, *Putting Jesus in His Place*, 35; they cite R.T. France (d. 2012 CE), "The Worship of Jesus: A Neglected Factor in Christological Debate?" in *Christ the Lord: Studies in Christology Presented to Donald Guthrie*, ed. Harold H. Rowdon (Leicester, UK; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1982), 35.

⁴²³ John 5:39-40, 45-46.

⁴²⁴ Christopher J. H. Wright, *Knowing Jesus through the Old Testament*, (Downers Grove, Inter-Varsity Press, 2014). Chapter 6 cites examples of Jesus' use of the term "I am" to denote that he was none other than the one who declared to Moses, "I am who I am."

It has been shown that there are other possible understandings to be considered of the passages Akyol selects. This is succinctly demonstrated when Akyol recalls Paul's conversion experience when he was blinded by a great light and is said to have met the divine Jesus in a supernatural way on the road to Damascus.⁴²⁵ Akyol says, "With such a powerful conviction, Paul developed his own theology independently of the Jerusalem Church led by James."⁴²⁶ Akyol's implication is that Paul, informed only by his vision, developed his theology in seclusion and thereby authored an aberrant version of Christianity. This conclusion ignores the scriptures that say Paul went to Jerusalem just a few years after the "road to Damascus" experience and met with Peter and James to ensure they agreed regarding their understandings of the Jesus of the Gospels.⁴²⁷ Despite the need for more scholarly rigor in Akyol's arguments, it will be demonstrated that his ideas foster understandings of the Jesus of Islam that are fascinating and potentially controversial and represent significant movements from formative-classical understandings.

⁴²⁵ Acts 9:1-19.

⁴²⁶ Akyol, *The Islamic Jesus*, 37.

⁴²⁷ See Galatians 1:18 for Paul's record of his trip to Jerusalem. Also see 1 Corinthians 15:3-8 for a record of the understanding agreed to by Paul, Peter, and James in Jerusalem.

4.3 Conclusions

This chapter concludes the introduction to the primary sources and introduces Ataie and Akyol, two significant contributors to this research. Ataie's effort to restore Aslan's "spiritually anemic" Jesus supports the idea that Ataie recognizes the need to correct unorthodox opinions and situate them within "normative Muslim parameters," like Harpci and al-Jibouri above. Ataie's proclivity to read John's Gospel through an Islamic lens leads him to wrestle with passages that are difficult to "situate" within an Islamic context, for example, God as "Father," and Jesus as the "Word" who existed before creation and through Whom everything was created.⁴²⁸ Ataie's "polemirencal" approach, "an attempt to harmonize the Christology of the Bible with the Qur'an, albeit under the framework of Islamic normativity," introduces many new ideas and understandings of the Jesus of Islam as will be demonstrated in later chapters.⁴²⁹ Ataie's assertion that 'Īsā's *Injīl* is preserved in the New Testament Gospels is one of a wide range of early Muslim views and may encourage Muslims to read the New Testament Gospels and embrace ideas resulting from his exegeses of the Gospel of John. I will show in the chapters to follow that Ataie's ideas create tension or conflict with formative-classical understandings.

⁴²⁸ John 1:18; "John 1:18; "No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father's side, has made him known."; John 1:1-3; "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made."

⁴²⁹ Ataie, *Authenticating the Johannine Injil*, 18.

Akyol tends to make assertions without recognizing differing opinions, leading to conclusions that weaken his arguments. Farah Adeed, a critic of Akyol, says, “Akyol’s arguments are both fascinating and persuasive. However, some of his ideas sound ‘contestable’ if not ‘controversial.’ A liberal interpretation of Islam may work for a few scholars or smaller communities in the US or the UK but for the complex and religiously conservative societies historically embedded so-called Islamic ideals are likely to overshadow reason and free-thinking.”⁴³⁰ Adeed’s observation suggests that Akyol will provide “contestable and controversial” insights in the chapters that follow regarding the Jesus of Islam.

In a recent interview, Akyol says, “I do speak of the need for an Islamic Enlightenment, and I stress the adjective, as this shall be based on Islamic sources and traditions, not merely copying Western Christian tradition. Now is something like that possible in today’s Islam? Yes, and it is in part already there.”⁴³¹ Does “Islamic Enlightenment” include new understandings of the Jesus of Islam? Akyol’s contributions to the themes in the following chapters suggests that it does.

⁴³⁰ Farah Adeed, “Can Islam Be Liberal? Review of ‘Reopening Muslim Minds.’” *Global Village Space*, August 13, 2021.

⁴³¹ Giancarlo Bosetti, “Mustafa Akyol: «It Is Time for a New Islamic Enlightenment».” *Reset DOC* (blog). Accessed January 25, 2022. <https://www.resetdoc.org/story/mustafa-akyol-it-is-time-for-an-islamic-enlightenment/>.

Part III - Movements in Contemporary Muslim Authors' Understandings of the Jesus of Islam

After performing content analysis of the primary source texts, I have identified nine themes representing variations from formative-classical understandings. I introduce the nine themes in the five chapters below: **Chapter 5 - *The Uniqueness of ʿĪsā*** includes Theme 1 - *ʿĪsā's unique relationship with Allah* and Theme 2 - *ʿĪsā the son of a unique mother*; **Chapter 6 - *The Nature of ʿĪsā as the Word of Allah*** includes Theme 3 - *ʿĪsā is like Muhammad in revelatory stature* and Theme 4 - *ʿĪsā is the living revelation of Allah*; **Chapter 7 - *Prophet of Hope - Future and Present*** includes Theme 5 - *ʿĪsā's eschatological role heralds the climax of human history* and Theme 6 - *ʿĪsā is the ultimate hope for Islam - a prophet for this time, for Muslims, Christians, and Jews*; **Chapter 8 - *Zealot and Martyr*** includes Theme 7 - *ʿĪsā is a zealot opposed to social evil* and Theme 8 - *ʿĪsā is a martyr, a "sacrificial lamb" for Israel's sake*; and **Chapter 9 - *The Object of Personal Appreciation*** includes Theme 9 - *ʿĪsā as the object of personal appreciation*.

In the following chapters, statements by the primary sources representing departures from formative-classical understandings are considered according to theme and classification. The themes will be discussed for variances from formative-classical understandings. Each chapter will offer a description of the chapter theme(s) and contrast it to the formative-classical framework as derived in Chapter 1.1. Quotes from the authors representing change will be introduced in the order of their classification.

The rationale for assigning a particular text to a particular classification will be offered followed by a discussion and analysis of the author's statement. This analysis will consider other possible meanings by the author, potential sources for the idea presented by the author if not the author himself, and criticisms from other Muslim scholars and authors regarding his ideas. Lastly, my opinions will be offered on the theme and its classification from formative-classical understandings where appropriate. Chapter 10 will summarize the variations observed in Chapters 5 through 9 and answer the question upon which I am focused.

Chapter 5 - The Uniqueness of ʿĪsā

According to formative-classical understandings, ʿĪsā has a unique relationship with Allah relative to his origin, birth, titles, mission, Gospel (*Injīl*), miracles, death, and eschatology. There appears to be a tension in the Islamic narrative regarding Muhammad as the ultimate prophet of Islam because of understandings of ʿĪsā expressed by the authors. An established belief of formative-classical Islam, that Muhammad is the ultimate and ʿĪsā the penultimate prophet of Islam from both a chronological and preeminence perspective, is brought into question through the authors' statements. This relationship is challenged when one considers the distinctiveness of ʿĪsā as discussed in this chapter. The tension arises from comparisons with formative-classical understandings of ʿĪsā. Not only does ʿĪsā appear to have a "uniqueness" among the prophets of Islam, but as will be seen in later chapters, Muslim authors look forward to his Second Coming, *nuzūl* ʿĪsā, when he will affirm the truth of Islam and Muhammad's prophethood.

This chapter suggests there are statements by the primary sources regarding ʿĪsā's unique status with Allah that offer understandings that either complement formative-classical understandings or are in tension with those understandings.

5.1 Theme 1 - ʿĪsā's unique relationship with Allah

The first theme is *ʿĪsā’s unique relationship with Allah*. That ʿĪsā is unique among the prophets is not contested within Islam, each prophet has a uniqueness that distinguishes their prophethood for the people of their time. Chapter 1.1 demonstrates that ʿĪsā has a unique relationship with Allah relative to his origin, birth, titles, mission, Gospel (*Injīl*), miracles, death, and eschatology. This chapter will establish that ʿĪsā’s uniqueness is changing amongst the primary sources in understandings regarding ʿĪsā’s created status, his miracles, and his being a model for mankind. I will examine ideas expressed by the authors which are not in conflict with formative-classical understandings but complement those understandings in ways that enhance the appreciation of ʿĪsā within Islam.

5.1.1 ʿĪsā’s Created Status

Akyol and Harpci speak on the unique nature of ʿĪsā in his creation. Akyol says, “A higher Qur’ānic Word theology puts Jesus somewhere between human beings and God—somewhere, one could suggest, on the same level with the angels. It is therefore perhaps telling that in its rejection of the Christian doctrine of the divinity of Christ, the Qur’an mentions him in the same breath with the angels near to God.”⁴³² Akyol is referring to Qur’an 4:172 which says, “The Messiah would never disdain to be a servant to God nor would the angels near to Him. If any do disdain to worship Him, and grow arrogant, He

⁴³² Akyol, *The Islamic Jesus*, 165.

will in any case gather them all to Him.”⁴³³ What is important about Akyol’s statement is how his appreciation of ‘Īsā demonstrates evolution in understanding of formative-classical understandings. The verse referenced by Akyol does suggest that in matters of worship, ‘Īsā is close to the angels in his constant devotion to Allah. However, Akyol’s interpretation of the verse complements formative-classical understandings, without conflict, by suggesting that the verse implies that in all matters ‘Īsā is very much like the angels. This is the first encounter with Akyol and his respect for ‘Īsā. He will have much more to say later regarding the eschatological role of ‘Īsā. His belief that ‘Īsā is one who is with Allah now, awaiting his Second Coming, may also be why he makes this statement concerning ‘Īsā as one who is “with the angels near to God.” Angels in Islam are a unique creation of Allah with powerful roles assigned by Him and constant devotion to Him. Akyol suggests that the status conferred upon ‘Īsā by the verse above is unique amongst mortals and prophets.

Harpci says, “The Holy Spirit was constantly with Jesus in different forms of manifestation or representation. He was with him from the moment the Virgin Mary conceived him until her delivery of the child. God embraced him and brought him up in a pure spiritual or metaphysical atmosphere and confirmed him with pure spirituality which would dispel the materialism of people at the time.”⁴³⁴ Harpci credits M. Fethullah Gülen

⁴³³ Qur’an 4:172, Bewley translation. The Itani translation says, “The Messiah does not disdain to be a servant of God, nor do the favored angels.” The Bewley translation is offered because the wording reflects Akyol’s reference using the words “angels near to him.”

⁴³⁴ Harpci, *Muhammad Speaking of the Messiah*, 92.

with this idea and Harpci's words are almost an exact quote from Gülen's commentary on Qur'an 2:87, though they are presented as a paraphrase.⁴³⁵ Chapter 1.1, the reference for a formative-classical framework for the understanding of 'Īsā, identified "Spirit of God" or "Holy Spirit" as Gabriel who was with Mary at her conception. The term "Holy Spirit" appears four times in the Qur'an and three of these are in reference to strengthening 'Īsā.⁴³⁶ So it is evident that Harpci's statement, "The Holy Spirit was constantly with Jesus," complements formative-classical understandings.⁴³⁷ Besides Harpci and Gülen, there are others who hold this interpretation. Mahmood Jawaid says, "When the Qur'ān states that 'Īsā was strengthened by the Holy Spirit (Rooh-ul-Quds), it implies that, though the real home of Jibraeel is the Throne (al-'Arsh), he was deputed to be in the presence of 'Īsā during his stay on the earth."⁴³⁸ This is a contemporary Muslim author supporting Harpci's assertion.⁴³⁹ Formative-classical understandings of Gabriel, or the Holy Spirit, do not suggest he was "constantly with Jesus" as Harpci and Jawaid have done. David Marshall, referring to Qur'an 2, says, "Apart from a mention of Jesus in a list

⁴³⁵ M. Fethullah Gülen, *Reflections on the Qur'an, Commentaries On Selected Verses by M. Fethullah Gulen*, Translated by Ayşenur Kaplan and Harun Gültekin (Clifton: Tughra Books, 2012), 52.

⁴³⁶ Qur'an 2:87, 253; 5:110; 16:102.

⁴³⁷ Laffoon, "The Qur'anic Word *Rūh* and Its Restricted Interpretations: An Analysis of Classical *Tafsīr* Tradition," 53-88. Laffoon compares the commentaries of al-Ṭabarī, al-Baydāwī, and al-Rāzī regarding the 20 times *rūh* occurs in the Qur'an and none of their exegeses suggests that the "Holy Spirit" or "Gabriel" was "constantly with Jesus," therefore, Harpci's statement complements formative-classical understandings without conflict.

⁴³⁸ Mahmood Jawaid, "The Holy Spirit Strengthening Isa (AS) - An Explanation," n.d., 1. https://www.academia.edu/66742347/The_Holy_Spirit_Strengthening_Isa_AS_An_Explanation.

⁴³⁹ Ibid. If Gabriel's role in formative-classical understandings was not as Jawaid and Harpci proposed, "constantly with Jesus," then Jawaid's paper to argue the point would not be necessary.

with other prophets (2:136) and a brief passage which seems to attack Christian beliefs about Jesus (2:116-17), it is twice said that God gave Jesus ‘clear signs,’ (i.e., miracles) and ‘confirmed him with the holy spirit’ (2:87, 253).⁴⁴⁰ “Confirming” a prophet with the “Holy Spirit” is a necessary but insufficient condition to assume the “Holy Spirit” was a “constant companion” to ‘Īsā. In Chapter 1.1, Parrinder said that the use of the word “Spirit” in the Qur’an is obscure.⁴⁴¹ This would imply there is room for variance in understandings of the “Spirit” and his activities without conflict with formative-classical understandings. Harpci’s statement represents a shift in formative-classical understandings since it affirms that the Holy Spirit or Gabriel is “constantly with” ‘Īsā. It seems that Harpci and Jawaid are enhancing the role of Gabriel from the occasional “strengthening” of ‘Īsā, as needed to perform his mission, to “constantly with” ‘Īsā. This complements formative-classical understandings.

5.1.2 Miracles

I move from ‘Īsā’s uniqueness in creation to his miracles as a sign of his unique relationship with Allah. Al-Jibouri demonstrates evolution in understandings of the Jesus of Islam regarding his miracles without conflicting with formative-classical understandings. As mentioned in his introduction, al-Jibouri was trying to address new

⁴⁴⁰ David Marshall, “Christianity in the Qur’ān,” in Ridgeon, *Islamic Interpretations of Christianity*, 12.

⁴⁴¹ Parrinder, *Jesus in the Quran*, 48.

Muslim converts in the West, specifically in Atlanta, Georgia. He knew they were in Christian communities and perhaps more knowledgeable about the Jesus of the Gospels than the Jesus of Islam. One topic he dealt with extensively was the miracles of Jesus. It seems likely that he believed the new converts to Islam were likely familiar with the miracles of the Jesus of the Gospels and would be interested to know that Islam also embraced a miracle-working Jesus. He begins his comments by paraphrasing Wahb ibn Munabbih (d. 725-737 CE) as saying, "Allah empowered him [ʿĪsā] to heal the sick, to cure those afflicted with permanent handicaps, to give sight back to the blind, to heal the mentally retarded, to suppress the power of evil, to forbid people from committing misdeeds, and to subject the devils to humiliation by permitting goodness to thus prevail ... he did as he was ordered."⁴⁴² Using this formative-classical understanding as a springboard, al-Jibouri begins a discourse on the miracles of the Jesus of Islam citing events from Islamic sources that would be familiar to converts with Christian backgrounds. These would include turning water into wine, curing the leprosy and the blind, raising Lazarus from death to life, and walking on water.⁴⁴³ Al-Jibouri also includes

⁴⁴² Wahb ibn Munabbih (d. 725-737 CE); as cited in Al-Jibouri, *Mary and Jesus in Islam*, 119. (Wahb ibn Munabbih is an authority in Islamic literature for biblical lore. His sayings are based primarily on biblical information, partly on post-biblical legends and partly on Islamic elaborations, sometimes with references to the Qur'an. Al-Jibouri does not cite his source for Wahb, but similar wordings can be found in al-Ṭabarī, Vol. 4, p. 118 who quotes Wahb.)

⁴⁴³ Al-Jibouri, *Mary and Jesus in Islam*, 141-144.

miracles of the Jesus of Islam that would be known to Muslims, including creating living birds from clay and bringing down food from heaven.⁴⁴⁴

The miracles al-Jibouri attributes to the Jesus of Islam that are not attributed to the Jesus of the Gospels, and perhaps not familiar to Muslims, are noteworthy. An example is an event narrated by al-Suddī (d. 745 CE). Al-Jibouri paraphrases al-Suddī as saying that Jesus used to tell his fellow classmates what their parents were doing and what food their parents were preparing at home. When the students' families asked them how they knew this, they would say "Jesus told us." As a result, Jesus' classmates were told by their parents that Jesus was a "sorcerer" and they should not play with him. Once they were gathered outside a home when Jesus arrived and asked what was in the house. They maliciously told him, "Pigs," to which Jesus responded, "So shall they be," and the door of the house was opened, and pigs came out.⁴⁴⁵ That Jesus created pigs in a house where there were none with no mention of "by Allah's leave" or "with Allah's permission" is of interest. This miracle is not only unfamiliar to people of Christian and Muslim backgrounds, but also represents change in formative-classical understandings. It was mentioned earlier that Khalidi observed that Jesus' ability to perform miracles evolved from relying on "Allah's leave," to possessing an intrinsic ability to do the miraculous as if it had been delegated to him by Allah. This miracle recorded by al-Suddī

⁴⁴⁴ Ibid, 140,147.

⁴⁴⁵ Ibid, 138.

and cited by al-Jibouri is a type of the evolution Khalidi observed. The nature of this miracle is of interest because of the evolution in understanding it represents. Of greater interest is the number of miracles cited by al-Jibouri that are not well known to Muslim or Christian readers because this appears to be his approach to assuring new Muslim converts that they do not have to let go of a miracle-working Jesus to embrace Islam. This is illustrated by the miracle involving “Sam the son of Noah.”⁴⁴⁶

Al-Jibouri says one of ‘Īsā’s miracles was the raising from the dead of “Sam the son of Noah.” Al-Jibouri does not cite his source and there is no hadīth from the Prophet that reports this miracle.⁴⁴⁷ Al-Qurṭūbī (d. 1273 CE) reports, without citing his source, that ‘Īsā “brought to life Sām ibn Nūḥ,” which is Sam son of Noah.⁴⁴⁸ It is not the chain of transmitters (isnād) that is important, rather, it is that a contemporary Muslim author chooses to highlight lesser-known and perhaps contested miracles to expand the understandings of the unique relationship ‘Īsā has with Allah. The premise, that al-Jibouri cites miracles of Jesus unfamiliar to those acquainted only with the Jesus of the Gospels because it assures new Muslim converts that they do not have to let go of a miracle-working Jesus to embrace Islam, is strengthened by this and other miracles cited by al-Jibouri. Instead of deconstructing the possible perceptions of Jesus held by his readers,

⁴⁴⁶ Al-Jibouri, *Mary and Jesus in Islam*, 119.

⁴⁴⁷ “Story of Eesa Jesus Reviving Sam ibn Noah - Islamweb - Fatwas.” Accessed July 6, 2022. <https://www.islamweb.net/en/fatwa/450436/story-of-eesa-jesus-reviving-sam-ibn-noah>.

⁴⁴⁸ Al-Qurṭūbī, *Tafsir al-Qurtubi*, Vol. 3, Translated by Aisha Bewley, 2020, 316.

al-Jibouri embraces a miracle-working Jesus and attributes to him even more mystical and supernatural powers than the Jesus of formative-classical understandings. He does not conflict with formative-classical understandings but enumerates and illuminates the miracles of the Jesus of Islam beyond formative-classical understandings. This enables his Muslim readers to embrace a miracle-working Jesus of Islam and engage in interreligious polemics with their surrounding Christian neighbors.

5.1.3 Model for mankind

Ataie says, “Jesus is *the model* for those who wish to have direct experience with God, since he was created in the womb of Mary directly without any male intervention. [emphasis added]”⁴⁴⁹ As a result of ‘Īsā’s virgin birth, Ataie believes Jesus has a unique position with Allah because he is “the model” for those wanting a direct experience with Allah. This does not conflict with formative-classical understandings but complements those understandings to suggest ‘Īsā’s unique creation makes him *the model*, as opposed to *a model*, for those wanting the relationship with Allah that he enjoys. Ataie’s words suggesting that ‘Īsā alone could experience the relationship with Allah that he enjoyed neglects Adam who was also born “without male intervention.”

I have been discussing Theme 1 - *‘Īsā’s unique relationship with Allah* using ideas from the primary sources that complement formative-classical understandings. I move

⁴⁴⁹ Ataie, *Authenticating the Johannine Injil*, 183.

now to ideas that create tension with those understandings. These ideas include: ʿĪsā’s unique status among mankind, ʿĪsā as the most “beloved of all creation,” and God’s “sanctified agent” regarding the governing of the cosmos.

5.1.4 Unique status among mankind

Akyol expresses ʿĪsā’s unique status among mankind, “For while describing Jesus, the Qur’ān ... uses its own theological concepts to praise Jesus—an exceptionally sublime praise given to no one else, including the Prophet Muhammad.”⁴⁵⁰ Akyol further distinguishes ʿĪsā saying, “The Qur’ān may be in line with Jewish Christianity in terms of its Christology as well: that the Messiah is no God, but also no ordinary mortal.”⁴⁵¹ How “Jewish Christianity” views the person of Jesus was discussed earlier [he was a prophet but not divine] and agreeing with those understandings it is Akyol’s view that ʿĪsā is unique in both praise and being, according to the Qur’an. Formative-classical understandings position ʿĪsā as unique in the circumstances of his birth, but mortal like all other mortals. Formative-classical understandings would agree that ʿĪsā is given high praise, perhaps higher than all other prophets beside the Prophet. But Akyol has in two statements presented a Jesus that is like no other mortal and afforded “exceptionally sublime praise” that is given to no other mortal, including Muhammad.

⁴⁵⁰ Akyol, *The Islamic Jesus*, 134.

⁴⁵¹ *Ibid*, 166.

Akyol's motive for venerating 'Īsā in a manner that might cause tension in the Islamic narrative is of interest. It is helpful to recall what was stated earlier: Akyol asserts Islam's only hope for reform, to make Islam relevant to modernity and bring the Caliphate to the waiting world, is the "amazing man" they share with the other Abrahamic religions, Jesus of Nazareth ('Īsā).⁴⁵² If it is Akyol's intent to bring reform to Islam, beginning with Islam in America, and he believes that reform must center on the person of 'Īsā, then it would be reasonable to assume he must draw his Muslim readers' attention to the person of 'Īsā through appreciation of him. I will examine Akyol's future comments to see if they support or refute this premise.

5.1.5 Beloved of all creation

Ataie, discussing the uniqueness of 'Īsā, says, "The decree to create the Messiah as a sapiential work takes precedence in rank, not in temporality, because he is possibly the most beloved of all creation to God."⁴⁵³ Describing 'Īsā as "the most beloved of all creation" is noteworthy since, according to Ataie, it appears to assign to 'Īsā a status that Islamic scholars have conferred upon Muhammad as the "Best of Creation."⁴⁵⁴ Ataie attempts to relieve this tension by saying, "The *ilham ilahi* (divine inspiration) of John

⁴⁵² Ibid, 8. This sentence is also a paraphrase of chapter 9.

⁴⁵³ Ataie, *Authenticating the Johannine Injil*, 148.

⁴⁵⁴ Al-Sawi (d. 1825 CE), *Sharh Jawhara al-Tawhid* (Commentary of the Precious Pearl), 123; as cited in Ataie, *Authenticating the Johannine Injil*, 161.

revealed the truth that Jesus Christ was one of the greatest and most beloved created entities in the history of creation, but in reality, and based on [the] prophetic apocalypse received by Muhammad, it is the latter who is the absolute best of creation.”⁴⁵⁵ Ataie’s nuance of ʿĪsā as “the most beloved of creation” and Muhammad as “the best of creation” may or may not relieve the tension depending on the reader’s perspective; one might prefer to be seen by Allah as the “most beloved of creation” as opposed to the “best of creation.” Regardless of Ataie’s intention in making this differentiation between ʿĪsā and Muhammad, he is expressing an appreciation for the uniqueness of ʿĪsā that may create tension with formative-classical understandings.

Ataie also strains formative-classical understandings as saying, “[Christ as] ‘the Word,’ or ‘the Son,’ possesses an ontological precedence with respect to the rest of creation ... he may be the Primordial Man ... the one who was preeminently created in God’s “image.”⁴⁵⁶ What does he mean by “ontological precedence” and “preeminently created”? Ataie explains, “In other words, the Logos, or Messianic light, was God’s first and most exalted creation, ‘the firstborn of all creation.’”⁴⁵⁷ This reference to Christ as the “Messianic light” draws the reader’s attention to the doctrine of al-nūr al-Muḥammadī, or the Light of Muhammad, in which the essence or spirit of Muhammad is

⁴⁵⁵ Ataie, *Authenticating the Johannine Injil*, 157.

⁴⁵⁶ *Ibid*, 128.

⁴⁵⁷ *Ibid*. Ataie cites Colossians 1:15.

created by Allah, followed by the universe and human beings.⁴⁵⁸ This doctrine teaches that the Light of Muhammad existed before all others in creation, which would include the “Messianic light.” Both the Muhammadan Light and the “Messianic light” were creations of Allah but, according to Ataie, the “Messianic light” was Allah’s “first and most exalted creation.” Ataie’s use of “Messianic Light” to describe ʿĪsā creates tension with the doctrine of al-nūr al-Muḥammadī and formative-classical understandings.

Ataie confers upon ʿĪsā a unique role in the governing of the cosmos when he says, “Christ speaks the words of God, receives the Spirit of God in abundance, is beloved to God, and thus also was made ‘partner’ in the governance of the cosmos.”⁴⁵⁹ He elaborates on Christ’s “partnership” with Allah, “It is literally true that ‘all created things were made through him, and nothing was made apart from him (John 11:3).’”⁴⁶⁰ Perhaps in realizing the potential conflict between Muhammad’s role in creation as the Muhammadan Light and Christ’s role as “all created things were made through him,” Ataie adds this clarification, “Thus perhaps while the world was made through Christ, it was made for the sake of Muhammad. Perhaps Christ is the ‘alpha’ and Muhammad is the ‘omega.’”⁴⁶¹ There may be ways to deconstruct these statements and make them

⁴⁵⁸ Annemarie Schimmel, *And Muhammad Is His Messenger: The Veneration of the Prophet in Islamic Piety*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), 123-143. See chapter seven, “The Light of Muhammad and the Mystical Tradition.”

⁴⁵⁹ Ataie, *Authenticating the Johannine Injil*, 207.

⁴⁶⁰ *Ibid*, 163.

⁴⁶¹ *Ibid*, 164.

conform with formative-classical understandings, but Ataie attributes to Christ a position and authority not explicitly granted in formative-classical understandings. ʿĪsā’s eschatological role challenges Ataie’s positioning of Christ (ʿĪsā) as the “alpha” and Muhammad as the “omega.” It is ʿĪsā that will bring about a universal Islam on the earth and affirm the truth of Islam and the prophethood of Muhammad. This appears to position ʿĪsā as the “alpha” and “omega” and Muhammad as the “mésó” (middle). This is an example of an idea presented by an author that creates tension with formative-classical understandings that position Muhammad as the final Prophet and ʿĪsā as the penultimate prophet. Unlike Ataie, most Muslim scholars do not accept the four Gospels of the New Testament [which includes the Gospel of John that Ataie is exegeting] as the actual *Injīl* of ʿĪsā. In exegeting the Gospel of John, Ataie introduces understandings of ʿĪsā that create tension with formative-classical understandings. In all faith traditions, embracing texts outside canonical norms can lead to conclusions that disagree with accepted truths. Ataie’s exegesis of the Gospel of John results in ideas that conflict with formative-classical understandings.

5.1.6 Sanctified agent

Working with the Gospel of John under the assumption it is the true *Injīl* of Christ, Ataie addresses the implication within John’s Gospel that Christ is the “incarnate Word of

God.”⁴⁶² Ataie says of this passage, “As God’s sanctified agent and theomorphic ‘image,’ Christ’s actions on earth represent the actions of God. Thus, Jesus is indeed equal with God at some level.”⁴⁶³ This statement demonstrates departure from formative-classical understandings which avoid any intimation that anything or anyone is equal to God by any connotation. In using the word “partner” to refer to ʿĪsā’s role in the governance of the cosmos above and using the statement “equal with God at some level,” Ataie has lifted ʿĪsā beyond formative-classical understandings and in ways that create tension with those understandings.

5.2 Theme 2 - ʿĪsā the son of a unique mother

The second theme is *ʿĪsā the son of a unique mother*. Several of the primary source authors comment on ʿĪsā and his unique mother. Mary is highly revered by Muslims because she is the only woman mentioned in the Qur’an, which refers to her over seventy times, and she is explicitly said to be “chosen over all the women of all the worlds.”⁴⁶⁴ I would expect to find Muslim authors in any historical period giving tribute to Mary. However, if one suggests through one’s appreciation of Mary that her unique status with Allah confers a uniqueness to her son’s standing as well, then one could be providing new understandings of ʿĪsā. The idea expressed below by al-Jibouri

⁴⁶² John 1:1-2.

⁴⁶³ Ataie, *Authenticating the Johannine Injil*, 229.

⁴⁶⁴ Qur’an 19; 3:42.

complements formative-classical understandings in ways that enhance the appreciation of ʿĪsā.

5.2.1 Speaking in the womb

Al-Jibouri quotes Mujāhid, “Mary, peace with her, has said, ‘Whenever I sought seclusion, Jesus would speak to me, and I would speak to him. If a human distracted me from that, he would praise the Almighty while being in my womb, and I would hear his praising,’ and Allāh knows best.”⁴⁶⁵ Al-Jibouri embraces these words to communicate that the person of Mary was a unique mother and her son was a person of great comfort to her even before he was born. We know from the Qur’an that ʿĪsā spoke to Mary as a child from the cradle.⁴⁶⁶ This saying of Mujāhid, according to al-Jibouri, states that ʿĪsā began speaking in the womb both to Mary and to Allah.⁴⁶⁷ It further suggests that this

⁴⁶⁵ Abū Bakr ibn Mujāhid (d. 936 CE); as cited in Al-Jibouri, *Mary and Jesus in Islam*, 111. Al-Jibouri does not cite his reference, therefore it is difficult to determine if these were Mujāhid’s words or an al-Jibouri paraphrase. Mujāhid was an Islamic scholar most notable for establishing and delineating the seven canonical Qur’anic readings (*qira’at*) in his work *Kitāb al-sab’a fī l-qirā’āt*.

⁴⁶⁶ Qur’an 19:29-34; Qur’an 3:45-46.

⁴⁶⁷ See Ibn Kathīr, *Stories of the Prophets*, 562-563. Ibn Kathīr reports that once “a voice cried out to her [Mary] from below.” He says scholars have two opinions on this: First, Ibn ‘Abbās and others said it was Jibreel’s voice; the second opinion from Mujāhid, Hasan and others, is that it was the voice of ʿĪsā. This suggests that formative-classical understandings reserved the possibility that ʿĪsā spoke from the womb, but al-Jibouri is expanding this understanding to be far more frequent and significant. Also see Calder, Rippin, and Mojaddedi, eds. *Classical Islam: A Sourcebook of Religious Literature*, 105. Quoting Muṭarrif al-Ṭarafī, *Storie dei profeti*, Genova, 1997: “Their censure of her increased ... such that she pointed to him (Q 19/29), that is, to Jesus, indicating that they should speak to him. So they said to her, ‘How can we speak to one who is still in the cradle, a child?’ (Q 19/29) The like of Jesus had not been known before and his ability to speak had not begun, so they thought that Mary was mocking them.” This understanding implies Jesus did not speak from the womb previously.

woman of significant standing in Islam found her son to be a source of comfort and peace, i.e., “seclusion,” to her. This idea complements formative-classical understandings and suggests a uniqueness about the person of ‘Īsā even before he was born.

5.2.2 Mary - a woman at the highest possible human level

In demonstrating appreciation for Mary, Akyol offers an idea that casts a uniqueness upon ‘Īsā and creates tension with formative-classical understandings. Akyol positions Mary in the Qur’an by saying, “The Islamic take on Mary elevates her to the highest possible human level—a woman ‘over all other women.’”⁴⁶⁸ After reading Qur’an 3:42 from which this statement was taken, it is unclear how Akyol can exegete this passage to mean “highest possible human level - a woman ‘over all other women.’” The verse is focused on Mary at the announcement, and subsequent conception, of ‘Īsā by Allah’s “word.” The verse implies that when the time had come to bring ‘Īsā into the world, Allah looked over the women of the world and chose Mary “over all other women,” [at that time]. Harpci agrees with this understanding when he says, “The Qur’ān presents Mary as one of the two exemplary women who lived before the Prophet Muhammad (Qur’ān 66:12). The Prophet Muhammad mentions her as one of the

⁴⁶⁸ Akyol, *The Islamic Jesus*, 132.

greatest women in the world.”⁴⁶⁹ Harpci’s understanding is that Mary was Allah’s choice from “the women in the world” who were in the world at the time of Allah’s choosing and was “one of two exemplary women.” Al-Jibouri, without citation, says of Fāṭima al-Zahrā, the daughter of Muhammad and the husband of ‘Alī, “She was declared by the Prophet as the Head of all the Women of the world.”⁴⁷⁰ These statements by Harpci and al-Jibouri appear to be in tension with what Akyol is implying. His exegesis is clear that Mary was not only chosen among the women that existed at that moment, but she was chosen because she was the best possible choice among the women who ever lived, or ever would live, as she was at the “highest possible human level.” This leaves little opportunity for someone to come later who could surpass Mary in uniqueness to Allah or be considered “Head of all the Women in the world,” as al-Jibouri says of Fāṭima. It is difficult to derive understandings from this statement other than Akyol believes Allah preferred Mary above all other women who have ever lived, which would include the women in Muhammad’s family.

The potential implications of venerating Mary for our view of ‘Īsā are of interest. If Mary is the greatest woman that has ever lived or will ever live, according to Akyol, does her son have a unique status with Allah? Does this create tension in the Islamic narrative regarding the greatest prophet? Recognizing that many great women have

⁴⁶⁹ Harpci, *Muhammad Speaking of the Messiah*, 28.

⁴⁷⁰ Al-Jibouri, *Kerbalā and Beyond*, 40.

borne evil progeny, I cannot answer these questions without additional evidence. Akyol recognizes the tension he is introducing by suggesting that Mary is a woman of the “highest possible human level” because he immediately asks, “But what about Mary’s son, what does it say about his identity and mission?”⁴⁷¹ He answers the question by providing understandings espousing the significance of ʿĪsā to Islam and the world, as will be discussed, supporting the idea that exalting Mary may also extol her son.

The evidence presented above, that ʿĪsā spoke from the womb as a comfort to his mother, and the evidences from earlier in this chapter and subsequent chapters revering ʿĪsā, indicate that both Mary and her son held a unique position with Allah; perhaps a uniqueness that creates tension regarding the importance of other mothers and their prophet sons in Islam.

5.3 Conclusions

This chapter is focused on the uniqueness of ʿĪsā. Two themes have been discussed: Theme 1 - *ʿĪsā’s unique relationship with Allah*, and Theme 2 - *ʿĪsā the son of a unique mother*. Ideas from the primary sources have been presented that complement formative-classical understandings.

A significant theme recurring in this chapter and some to follow is that there appears to be tension in the Islamic narrative regarding ʿĪsā or Muhammad as the

⁴⁷¹ Akyol, *The Islamic Jesus*, 132.

ultimate prophet of Islam because of understandings expressed by the authors. An established belief of formative-classical Islam, that Muhammad is the ultimate and ʿĪsā the penultimate prophet of Islam from both a chronological and preeminence perspective, is brought into question through the authors' statements. This relationship is challenged when I consider the distinctiveness of ʿĪsā as discussed in this chapter. This chapter suggests that ʿĪsā's uniqueness is evolving amongst the primary sources regarding his created status, miracles, being the model for mankind, and ability to speak from the womb through understandings that complement formative-classical understandings. Other understandings create tension with formative-classical understandings to include his being unique among mankind, the most beloved of all creation, a sanctified agent of Allah, and an exceptional son of an exceptional woman, Mary, at the "highest possible human level." These variances create tension in the Islamic narrative and this trend will continue in the chapters that follow.

Chapter 6 - The Nature of ʿĪsā as the Word of Allah

Formative-classical understandings, as discussed in Chapter 1.1, identify ʿĪsā as the “word of God.” According to these understandings, ʿĪsā is the “word of God” in the sense that he came into being by God’s word, not that he is eternal like God’s Word the Qur’an.⁴⁷² There is another sense in which ʿĪsā is Allah’s “word” and that is as a prophet or messenger. ʿĪsā is one of several prophets to bring a message from God, a “word,” which was a book of divine revelation, the *Injīl*. Muhammad was also a prophet of Allah, the Prophet whose “word” was the Qur’an. By formative-classical understandings, Muhammad was preeminent over ʿĪsā in both the nature of his prophethood, as the final prophet, and the nature of his revelation, the Qur’an. Using this understanding of ʿĪsā as the “word” of Allah, I will analyze the authors’ comments below for deviation from earlier understandings.

This chapter will introduce Theme 3 - *ʿĪsā is like Muhammad in revelatory stature*, and Theme 4 - *ʿĪsā is the living revelation of Allah*. Themes 3 and 4 are closely related but distinct. Both involve recognition that as a prophet, ʿĪsā brings the word of Allah to his people. Theme 3 is about the *nature of the prophethood* of Muhammad and ʿĪsā. Formative-classical understandings suggest that while both were prophets, Muhammad’s prophethood was superior as he was the final Prophet. Theme 3 suggests that the

⁴⁷² Qur’an 4:171; 3:39, 45. Also see Ayoub, “Jesus the Son of God: A Study of the Terms Ibn and Walad in the Qur’an and Tafsīr Tradition,” 77.

understandings of some of our primary sources regarding the *nature* of ‘Īsā’s *prophethood* is evolving such that ‘Īsā is encroaching upon Muhammad’s status as the superior and final prophet. Theme 4 is about the *nature of the revelations* given to Muhammad and ‘Īsā. Formative-classical understandings depict both prophets as important to their times and cultures and bringing a “word” of Allah to the people of their day; ‘Īsā’s word (the *Injīl*) was to the Jews, and Muhammad’s “word” (the Qur’an) was an “eternal word” for all mankind. Theme 4 suggests that understandings of the *nature* of the *revelations* given to ‘Īsā are evolving such that ‘Īsā’s “word” is also an “eternal word” encroaching upon Muhammad’s status as the only prophet through whom an “eternal word” was revealed and preserved. As before, I will offer statements by the primary sources that represent understandings that complement formative-classical understandings or are in tension with those understandings.

6.1 Theme 3 - ‘Īsā is like Muhammad in revelatory stature

Theme 3 - *‘Īsā is like Muhammad in revelatory stature* - is about the *nature of the prophethood* of Muhammad and ‘Īsā. None of the authors’ statements in this theme conflict with formative-classical understandings. However, Ataie, Saritoprak and Harpci offer understandings that complement formative-classical understandings in ways that enhance the appreciation of ‘Īsā.

6.1.1 “Nearest” to Muhammad

Ataie uses the Qur’an and the Gospel of John, which he affirms as the *Injīl* of ʿĪsā, to introduce this theme.⁴⁷³ He says ‘Abd Allāh means “servant of Allah” and this term is only applied to two people in the Qur’an, Muhammad and ʿĪsā.⁴⁷⁴ In this brief statement, Ataie has placed the prophethood of Muhammad and ʿĪsā in a unique category relative to the other prophets. He continues, “Full submissiveness and belief in Jesus as Christ render us ‘children of God,’ meaning ‘beloved of God,’ and that this ‘adoption’ into ‘God’s own family’ is further accomplished by endearing ourselves to the Holy House of Christ. Thus, identical to the message of Muhammad, the love of Christ and his Family is the foundation of the message of Jesus Christ.”⁴⁷⁵ According to Ataie, ʿĪsā is not like all the other prophets in this respect, he is only like Muhammad. In two simple statements, Ataie positions ʿĪsā as “like Muhammad” in his servanthood (prophetic role) and insists that love for him, and his family, is the essence of faith for a Muslim. Ataie’s statements demonstrate variances from formative-classical understandings. Muhammad said of ʿĪsā, “Both in this world and in the Hereafter, I am the nearest of all the people to Jesus, the son of Mary.”⁴⁷⁶ I can understand what Muhammad meant by “nearest” for he said,

⁴⁷³ Ataie, *Authenticating the Johannine Injil*, 66.

⁴⁷⁴ Ibid, 213. Qur’an 19:30 refers to ʿĪsā. There are numerous references to Muhammad as a Servant of Allah including Qur’an 2:23 and 17:1.

⁴⁷⁵ Ibid, 125.

⁴⁷⁶ Al-Bukhārī 4:55:652.

“There has been no prophet between me and him (Jesus).”⁴⁷⁷ Therefore, Muhammad was speaking in terms of chronological sequence, that ‘Īsā was the penultimate prophet to him, the “nearest” chronologically. But Ataie is not implying that ‘Īsā is “nearest” to Muhammad in chronological sequence, he is saying he is “identical” in both prophetic role and familial position. This may not conflict with formative-classical understandings, but it does complement those understandings and increase the stature of ‘Īsā among the prophets.

I continue with some of Ataie’s other statements that bring ‘Īsā’s prophethood into a closer proximity to Muhammad’s. Ataie says, “The Johannine Jesus (‘Īsā) was a beloved and sanctified agent of God, annihilated in God’s very character, who taught the world profound and transcendental spiritual verities that were actualized and taught by the great Sufi Masters a few centuries later.”⁴⁷⁸ The words “annihilated in God’s very character” are of interest because it is difficult to imagine being closer to God in nature than to be “annihilated” in one’s character. Ataie continues, “We must all be Christic or Muhammadan; we must tread the mystical path leading to mastery of the lower self and union with the Master of all, the King of the universe. This is our tahaqquq (actualization)

⁴⁷⁷ Al-Bukhārī 4:55:651.

⁴⁷⁸ Ataie, *Authenticating the Johannine Injil*, 423. Also see William Harmless, *Mystics* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 164. The phrase “annihilated in God’s character” is a common Sufi expression according to Harmless who says, “The most controversial of the Sufi states is “annihilation” or “passing away” (*fanā*). In annihilation, the Sufi mystic loses all sense of himself. He experiences his very being swallowed up within God’s infinite being. God becomes, during this ephemeral state, his very existence.”

to His Name.”⁴⁷⁹ The phrase “annihilated in God’s very character” is Sufi in origin as Ataie understands when he says, “we must tread the mystical path.” Ataie wrote this comment in response to the passage in the Gospel of John where Jesus rides into Jerusalem on a donkey.⁴⁸⁰ In this description, Jesus is demonstrating his humility, by riding on the colt of an ass, and kingliness; he was fulfilling a Jewish prophecy that the Jewish king would come riding on a colt.⁴⁸¹ Ataie’s use of the words “Christic or Muhammadan” to describe this scene captures one’s attention because the terms position ʿĪsā as being like Muhammad in prophethood; both humbled themselves to Allah’s will and offered a path to union with Allah, “the Master of all.” There is no conflict with formative-classical understandings of the prophethood of ʿĪsā and Muhammad within Ataie’s statements, but whatever “nearness” they enjoyed in formative-classical understandings appear to be made “nearer still” by Ataie.

6.1.2 “Alpha” of creation

I complete a survey of Ataie’s statements within this theme by citing again a passage already mentioned in the previous chapter, “Perhaps while the world was made through Christ, it was made for the sake of Muhammad. Perhaps Christ is the ‘alpha’ and

⁴⁷⁹ Ibid, 337.

⁴⁸⁰ John 12:12-19.

⁴⁸¹ Zechariah 9:9.

Muhammad is the ‘omega.’ Either way, they were both created by God.”⁴⁸² In the previous chapter, this statement was used to demonstrate ‘Īsā’s uniqueness in creation regarding temporality. Here the statement is of interest because of the implication that time is “bookended” between ‘Īsā (‘alpha’) and Muhammad (‘omega’). This metaphor implies a similarity in importance and function regarding ‘Īsā and Muhammad that is typically not articulated by formative-classical understandings. Which is more important, the alpha or omega of time? Ataie’s choice of words communicates a “nearness” in a prophetic role that complements formative-classical understandings.

6.1.3 Intercession

Saritoprak suggests a similarity in ‘Īsā’s and Muhammad’s prophethood relative to their intercessory roles. He says, “In the afterlife, Jesus is allowed to intercede and ask God to forgive sinners, but he cannot forgive sinners by himself. This is also true for the Prophet of Islam.”⁴⁸³ According to Saritoprak, ‘Īsā has a quality possessed by him and Muhammad, intercession for the forgiveness of sins. Zaenal Arifin says, “Most of Islamic Ulama acknowledge the existence of syafa’at [intercession] in the Day of Judgment ... however, some still question it.”⁴⁸⁴ Arifin says that the intercessions will include “angels,

⁴⁸² Ataie, *Authenticating the Johannine Injil*, 164.

⁴⁸³ Saritoprak, *Islam’s Jesus*, xii. Qur’an 4:64 addresses Muhammad’s ability to intercede for the Ummah.

⁴⁸⁴ Zaenal Arifin, “Syafa’at (Intercession) in Al-Qur’an Perspective (A Study on the Interpretation of Maudhu’i).” *Islam Futura* 18, no. 2 (February 2019), 330.

prophets, pious people and good deeds ... with the permission and blessings of Allah.”⁴⁸⁵

Shaun Marmon agrees with Arifin but adds, “Sacred intercession in this world, in linear time, [is] hotly contested. The radical reformer Ibn Taymiyya denounced some of the most embedded practices in Muslim piety: specifically, the visiting of tombs (*ziyārat al-qubūr*) and the petitioning of the holy dead - the awliyā, the Prophet Muhammad and preceding prophets - for intercession in the daily life of Muslims.”⁴⁸⁶ Saritoprak’s acknowledgment of intercessory roles for both ʿĪsā and Muhammad on the Day of Judgement is not in conflict with Arifin or Marmon’s understandings. However, by highlighting ʿĪsā’s intercessory role as identical to Muhammad’s, Saritoprak promotes a “nearness” in prophetic roles of ʿĪsā and Muhammad. How some of the primary sources position Muhammad and ʿĪsā within their understandings of intercession will be discussed later.

6.1.4 Spiritual rank

Saritoprak was also interested in the spiritual rank of Qur’anic figures. He cites Ibn ʿArabī saying, “Ibn ʿArabi draws a comparison between the spiritual rank of Jesus, who will descend at the end of time, and Abū Bakr, the first caliph, who Sunnī Muslim theologians accept as the highest in spiritual rank after the Prophet: ‘Surely, it is known that Jesus,

⁴⁸⁵ Ibid, 340.

⁴⁸⁶ Shaun E. Marmon, “The Quality of Mercy: Intercession in Mamluk Society.” *Studia Islamica*, no. 87 (1998), 128; referring to Taqī al-Dīn ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328 CE).

peace be upon him, is higher in religious rank than Abu Bakr."⁴⁸⁷ Saritoprak, who considers himself a scholar of *nuzūl* ʿĪsā, understands the significance of ʿĪsā's eschatological role in affirming the truth of Islam and Muhammad's prophethood. Both Muhammad and the Qur'an assign ʿĪsā the role of securing a lasting world peace for Islam after his return. When this occurs, ʿĪsā will affirm both the Qur'an's divine inspiration and Muhammad's prophethood.

Saritoprak recognizes that ʿĪsā's eschatological role may create tension with formative-classical understandings which affirm Muhammad as the final Prophet. To address this concern, Saritoprak quotes Ibn ʿArabi, "He [Ibn ʿArabi] describes Jesus as the 'seal of general sainthood,' whereas Muhammad is the 'seal of the prophets.'"⁴⁸⁸ Saritoprak offers Ibn ʿArabi's nuance as a resolution to any perceived tension. Does inventing a new title for ʿĪsā, "seal of general sainthood," resolve the tension created by his importance in Islamic eschatology? "Seal" as it is used in both titles implies the "last" of the type. Ibn ʿArabī was offering ʿĪsā as the last of the general saints [after his return] whereas Muhammad is the last of the prophets. Saritoprak, referencing Ibn ʿArabi's nuance, does not alleviate the tension raised regarding contemporary understandings of ʿĪsā's eschatological role, rather, it brings the tension into focus. I will discuss ʿĪsā's eschatological role in Chapter 7, but what is relevant now is Saritoprak's recognition of

⁴⁸⁷ Ibn ʿArabī, *Al-Futuhāt al-Makkiya*, 13:136–37; as cited in Saritoprak, *Islam's Jesus*, 127.

⁴⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

the proximity of ʿĪsā’s prophethood to Muhammad’s; a “nearness” in revelatory and prophetic nature.

Ibn Taymiyya wrote a narrative of the Prophet’s famous Mi’rāj, or night journey. Saritoprak summarizes Ibn Taymiyya saying, “Ibn Taymiyya singles out Jesus from the other prophets Muhammad met during this journey, saying the Prophet met Jesus in body and spirit, whereas Muhammad met with other prophets only in spirit.”⁴⁸⁹

Saritoprak offers another example of potential drift in understandings of the Jesus of Islam when he says, “The most notable part of Ibn Taymiyya’s narrative is his emphasis on the relationship between the Prophet of Islam and Jesus, which is seen as much greater than Muhammad’s relationship with other messengers of God.”⁴⁹⁰ Saritoprak is impressed by ʿĪsā’s position within this narrative of the Mi’rāj. He is not presented as one of many prophets Muhammad encountered in his journey to Allah, but as one having a unique relationship with Muhammad; “much greater than Muhammad’s relationship with other messengers.” Saritoprak’s observations are not in disagreement with formative-classical understandings, but they demonstrate an admiration for the person of Jesus in Islam and an elevation of his prophethood, similar in nature to Muhammad’s.

⁴⁸⁹ Saritoprak paraphrases Ibn Taymiyya, *‘Majmu’ al-Fatawa*, 4:316, 322–23, 328–29; as cited in Saritoprak, *Islam’s Jesus*, 107.

⁴⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

6.1.5 Prophetic role

I now engage ideas from Harpci regarding the nature of ʿĪsā’s prophetic role. He says, “The words of God were revealed to Jesus and that in this sense alone he can be called a Word from God. In other words, Jesus as the ‘word’ means it is a form of ‘prophetic’, or he came ‘to bring and proclaim a word.’”⁴⁹¹ Harpci is arguing that ʿĪsā’s title “Word of God” complements formative-classical understandings, namely, that ʿĪsā is the “Word of God” because he was created by a word from God. Harpci is saying that ʿĪsā received “words” from God and this may be the reason he should be called “Word of God.” Certainly, ʿĪsā’s *Injīl* was a “word” from God, as were all the *rusuls*’ “messages,” but Harpci suggests that apart from his *Injīl*, ʿĪsā regularly received “words” from God while serving Allah as a prophet on the earth. This enhances the nature of ʿĪsā’s prophetic role complementing formative-classical understandings.

Harpci continues, “Jesus then, is in a heavenly spiritual dimension close to the earthly realm. He, as well as others in the spiritual worlds, is able to influence earthly matters as God wills.”⁴⁹² I discussed previously that within Islamic theology, several beings may be able to intercede for sinners to include prophets, angels, martyrs, and saints. But the question is broader than intercession for sins, it is an ability to “influence earthly matters” from heavenly positions. I discussed Marmon’s comment that

⁴⁹¹ Harpci, *Muhammad Speaking of the Messiah*, 33. Harpci is referring to three Qur’anic references to Jesus as God’s “word”; Qur’an 3:35, 49; 4:171.

⁴⁹² *Ibid*, 202.

“intercession in this world, in linear time, [is] hotly contested.” Al-Jibouri suggests that all Imams after Muhammad have this authority. He says, “The hero of Kerbalā’, Imām Hussain (as), was succeeded by nine sinless and infallible Imāms who led the Islamic nation and are still leading it to the Straight Path, the path of happiness in the life of this world and salvation in the life to come.”⁴⁹³ Al-Jibouri does not elaborate on what he means by “still leading it” but the implication is that there may be some interaction today between the Imams and the ummah (community of Muslim believers), but do other prophets of Islam have this ability? There are reports from many eras of Muslims having dreams and visions of Muhammad.⁴⁹⁴ Muhammad suggested the faithful may experience dreams of himself.⁴⁹⁵ Sam Martyn says some Muslims may apply this hadīth to other prophets of Islam.⁴⁹⁶ While it is debatable who may have this ability within Islam, Harpci says ‘Īsā does. This discussion is included in this section because ‘Īsā’s prophetic role is elevated by the authors, moving him closer to Muhammad in the nature of his prophethood. This is not necessarily in conflict with formative-classical understandings, but it does appear to complement those understandings.

⁴⁹³ Al-Jibouri, *Kerbalā and Beyond*, 207.

⁴⁹⁴ Hassan Shaddad Ba’Alawi and Ahmad Abdul Aziz, *Muhammadan Visions: Visions of the Prophet Muhammad and Proven Means to Dream of Him* ((s.l.): Wasila Press, 2020). This book records many dreams and visions Muslims across various eras have experienced of Muhammad visiting them and communicating with them.

⁴⁹⁵ Al-Bukhārī 1:3:110.

⁴⁹⁶ Sam Martyn, “The Role of Pre-Conversion Dreams and Visions in Islamic Contexts: An Examination of the Evidence.” *Southeaster Theological Review*, STR 9.2, Fall (2018): 59.

This section has given examples of variations from formative-classical understandings that are not in conflict with formative-classical understandings but appear to complement those understandings. The primary sources appear to make statements about the prophethood of ʿĪsā that not only affirm Muhammad’s observation that ʿĪsā is “nearest” to him in prophetic order, but also suggest that ʿĪsā’s prophethood is “nearest” to Muhammad’s in nature.

6.2 Theme 4 - ʿĪsā is the living revelation of Allah

Theme 4 positions *ʿĪsā as the living revelation of Allah* and is about the *nature of the revelations* given to Muhammad and ʿĪsā. Before I can make comparisons about the nature of the revelations of Muhammad and ʿĪsā, it is useful to review the formative-classical understandings of each. Formative-classical understandings identify ʿĪsā as a prophet because he received a “word” from Allah, his *Injīl*, which was to be shared with his people, the Jews. Muhammad brought the Qur’an to his people and that revelation is relevant to the past, present, and future; it is a static, written, revelation. Muhammad also offered words and practices throughout his life that are recorded and referred to as the Sunnah. In addition, narratives about the sayings and other actions of the Prophet are called the Hadīth. What is important to understand in this chapter, and those that follow, is that Muhammad is believed to have made some “mistakes.”⁴⁹⁷ Ahmad Hasan

⁴⁹⁷ Qur’an 66: 1–2. In this verse the Prophet is asked by Allah to retract some oaths he had made. These oaths were not in disagreement with shariah, and not of any harm to the Prophet, but Allah thought that

says the infallibility of the prophets in Islam is disputed among Muslim scholars regarding personal character and whether they can commit grave or minor sins. Hasan paraphrases al-Rāzī as saying, “Prophets are immune from committing grave and minor sins deliberately, but they may commit mistakes or sin inadvertently.”⁴⁹⁸ Therefore, every word of Muhammad, apart from the Qur’an, is not to be taken as the word of Allah because some of Muhammad’s words may be “mistakes.”⁴⁹⁹

Qur’an 47 is an address by Allah to Muhammad. In Qur’an 47:19, Allah says, “Know that there is no god but God, and ask forgiveness for your sin, and for the believing men and believing women. God knows your movements, and your resting-place.” Allah is commanding that Muhammad ask forgiveness for both himself and “the believing men and believing women.” The implication is that Muhammad could make “mistakes” that needed “forgiveness” or correction by Allah. I acknowledged earlier that the concept of infallibility of the prophets and Imams is an impassioned discussion within Islam.

other members of the ummah, in their desire to emulate Muhammad, might also try to adopt these oaths which would not be beneficial for them. Other “mistakes” are recorded in Qur’an 9: 43, Qur’an 80: 1 – 16, Qur’an 18: 23 – 24.

⁴⁹⁸ Fakh al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *‘Ismat al-Anbiyā’* Alexandria MS. (Al-Maktabat al-Baldīyah), No. 2781; as cited in Ahmad Hasan, “The Concept of Infallibility in Islam.” *Islamic Studies* 11, no. 1 (March 1972), 5. Hasan notes that Shi’a are much more emphatic on the doctrine of infallibility than Sunnis and believe that their Imams (including Muhammad) were sinless, immune from both grave and minor sins, “but they may fall into a minor ‘slip’.” Also see Faraz Khan, *An Introduction to Islamic Theology* (Berkeley: Zaytuna College, 2020), 178. Khan says, “Infallibility with regard to sins after revelation is affirmed according to Sunni orthodoxy, but not according to the Hashwiyah, for they transmit in the stories of David, Solomon, Joseph, and other prophets what would appear to be the committing of sins.” Therefore, I will use the word “mistake” to acknowledge that Prophets (and Imams) may make errors or sin ‘inadvertently’ without necessarily committing a grave or minor sin.

⁴⁹⁹ Muslim, 30:5832. This hadīth records Muhammad offering agricultural advice regarding the grafting of trees that was mistaken and resulted in a poor crop.

According to al-Rāzī, every word of Muhammad may not have been the word of Allah. It is reasonable to infer that other prophets of Islam, including ʿĪsā, may not have sinned but may have made mistakes. *Rasuls*, those who were given a message from Allah, may also have received the words of Allah for the purpose of their “message” but likely did not always speak the words of Allah. This summarizes formative-classical understandings of the nature of the revelations the prophets received in Islam to include Muhammad and ʿĪsā. With this understanding I can analyze the authors’ statements regarding the nature of ʿĪsā’s revelations to detect changes from formative-classical understandings. Theme 4 positions ʿĪsā as one who brings a dynamic revelation relevant to the past, present, and future; his is a “living revelation.”

6.2.1 “Word of God”

First, I will examine some ideas expressed by the primary sources which are not in conflict with formative-classical understandings but complement those understandings in ways that enhance the appreciation of ʿĪsā. Ataie says, “Jesus is the “word of Him (God),” a “Sign unto mankind,” and a “mercy from Us,” “among the beloved Near Ones,” who teaches his people to be “lordly/divinized,” coupled with the fact that the only other person called by the anarthrous “mercy/rahma” (by God) in the Qur’ān is the Prophet Muhammad in the iconic Q 21:107.”⁵⁰⁰ Ataie explains what he means when he says

⁵⁰⁰ Ataie, *Authenticating the Johannine Injil*, 412.

“Jesus is the ‘word of God,’” by adding the qualifiers, “sign to mankind,” “a mercy from God,” “to the ‘Near Ones,’” teaching people to be “divinized.”⁵⁰¹ He will offer further explanations in the next section but this statement introduces tension with formative-classical understandings regarding the nature of ʿĪsā’s revelations. Ataie is offering an understanding of ʿĪsā as the “Word of God” that complements formative-classical understandings because it goes beyond suggesting ʿĪsā was created by God’s “word” or that ʿĪsā as a prophet brought a “word” from God. It suggests that ʿĪsā is a “sign,” a “mercy,” a way for people to become “divinized,” which means to become like God in some sense. Ataie adds that only Muhammad has been referred to in similar terms, referencing the Qur’an which states, “We did not send you except as mercy to mankind.”⁵⁰² Ataie presents ʿĪsā as a *living revelation to mankind* through his choice of words, appending that Muhammad had a similar role. This is another example of a contemporary understanding diminishing the distance between ʿĪsā and Muhammad in prophetic nature.

⁵⁰¹ “Near Ones” is most likely a reference to Qur’an 2:215 in which some translations use the term “near ones.” Mohammad Shafi, trans. “Islam Awakened: Qur’an Tafsir of Surah al-Baqarah.” Accessed May 31, 2024. <http://islamawakened.com/quran/2/st2.htm>.

“They ask you what is it that they should spend. Say, ‘That which you spend of good ought to be for parents, near ones, orphans, the poor and the wayfarer. And whatever good you do, Allah is indeed aware of it.’”

⁵⁰² Qur’an 21:107.

6.2.2 God's perfected agent

Ataie says, "Jesus is the sanctified and perfected agent of God's activity in the world."⁵⁰³ This statement introduces a change in understanding of 'Īsā: That he is the "perfected agent of God's activity in the world." What does it look like to be God's "perfected agent ... in the world"? It was mentioned above that formative-classical understandings imply that the prophets made "mistakes." It does not seem possible for one to make a "mistake" and still be a "perfected agent of God's activity in the world." Allah can use one's mistakes to demonstrate other good actions, like repentance and forgiveness, but these good actions redeem the mistake, not erase it. God, in Muslim belief, does not make mistakes and the implication that 'Īsā is the "perfected agent of God's activity in the world" demonstrates an appreciation of 'Īsā, unique among the prophets, that exceeds formative-classical understandings.

Recognizing the potential for tension created by his statement regarding 'Īsā being without mistake while Muhammad and the other prophets may have made mistakes, Ataie says, "Jesus ... parallels the Qur'anic Muhammad who reflects God's character and attributes on earth, is 'one' with Allah in his obedience and pleasure."⁵⁰⁴ Ataie's effectiveness in defending Muhammad's preeminence is subject to the reader's judgment. In this statement Muhammad "reflects" God's character, and in the previous

⁵⁰³ Ataie, *Authenticating the Johannine Injil*, 8.

⁵⁰⁴ *Ibid*, 9.

statement ʿĪsā “is” the perfect example of God’s activity (character) in the world. Is a “reflection” as good as the actual image? Most would agree that there is some distortion in a reflection because of the imperfect “reflector” between the source and the observer’s eye. The authors’ statements about ʿĪsā, regarding his nature and the nature of his revelations, challenge formative-classical understandings creating tension in the Islamic narrative regarding the preeminence of Muhammad relative to ʿĪsā.

Ataie says, “Christ is God’s very immanence; the one who reveals the ethos of his Lord and mirrors the pleroma of His majestic and beautiful attributes as much as is possible for a human being.”⁵⁰⁵ Ataie, adding the qualifier “as much as is possible for a human being,” venerates ʿĪsā to the highest possible degree. I discussed the unstated tension in the Islamic narrative between ʿĪsā and Muhammad and Ataie’s choice of words intensifies the strain. To summarize Ataie, “Christ is God’s very immanence [not reflection] ... as much as is possible for a human being.” Ataie does use the word “mirror” in this phrase, but it is interesting that he uses “immanence” in the same sentence. How can one both possess deity within and reflect that deity? It seems one can do one or the other but not both; there is no need to mirror [reflect] what you possess [one would radiate or emit God’s character in this case, not mirror]. It can be argued that Ataie is using metaphors without scrutinizing them as carefully as I am. This may be the case, but when an author uses a metaphor without qualification, the reader is left to consider the

⁵⁰⁵ Ibid, 212.

full implications of the metaphor and embrace all potential applications to its applied object as being within the realm of the author's intent. This will be demonstrated in the following section when Ataie employs al-Ghazālī's analogy.

6.2.3 Al-Ghazālī's analogy

Regarding the revelatory nature of 'Īsā, Ataie says, "The 'whole Jesus' cannot be captured in a single document, not even John. The real Jesus is expansive. To use Ghazali's analogy with the Qur'an in his *Jewels*, Jesus is like an ocean whose most precious stones lie in the great deep."⁵⁰⁶ To understand Ataie's statement, I must first visit "Ghazali's analogy." Al-Ghazālī wrote *The Jewels of the Qur'ān* in which he compared the Qur'an to an ocean filled with precious jewels. He said, "Has it not come to your knowledge that the Qur'ān is an ocean and that it is from the Qur'ān that the sciences of the ancients and the moderns branch off, just as rivers and brooks branch off from the shores of an ocean?"⁵⁰⁷ Al-Ghazālī has captured his love for the Qur'an and his appreciation for its depth and breadth by comparing it to an ocean with many branches (rivers and brooks) all of which are filled with precious stones if one would only wade or dive in to gather them. This is al-Ghazālī's analogy. According to Ataie, 'Īsā is like the

⁵⁰⁶ Ibid, 389.

⁵⁰⁷ Al-Ghazālī, *The Jewels of the Qur'an: Al-Ghazali's Theory : A Translation, with an Introduction and Annotation, of Al-Ghazali's Kitab Jawahir al-Qur'an*, Translated by Muhammad Abul Quasem (Kuala Lumpur: Islamic Book Trust, 2013), 8.

ocean in al-Ghazālī's analogy, that is, as al-Ghazālī sees the Qur'an, so Ataie sees 'Īsā; like an ocean with many branches possessing great gemstones for all who would examine to discover them. Ataie says, "To use Ghazali's analogy with the Qur'an [which is like an ocean] in his *Jewels*, Jesus is like an ocean." It can be argued, as was discussed above, that Ataie only intended to compare Jesus to the "ocean" in al-Ghazālī's analogy. But if this were the case, then he need not reference al-Ghazālī's analogy and could simply have spoken of the depth and riches of the wisdom of 'Īsā. But because he does reference al-Ghazālī's analogy without qualification, as was discussed above, the reader is left to consider the possibility that Ataie is comparing 'Īsā to the Qur'an.⁵⁰⁸ This interpretation will be reinforced in the next section where Ataie makes a similar comparison. This comparison increases the tension between 'Īsā and Muhammad in the Islamic narrative as it assigns 'Īsā to two categories, prophet of Islam and eternal word of Islam. I will discuss this in the next section when I examine an idea from Ataie that creates tension with formative-classical understandings.

I have discussed above how 'Īsā's revelatory nature has been venerated beyond formative-classical understandings, complementing but not necessarily conflicting with

⁵⁰⁸ Also see David Marshall, "Conversations in Canterbury," in David Marshall and Lucinda Mosher, eds. *Death, Resurrection, and Human Destiny* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2014), 232. Marshall says, "A Muslim pointed out that there is some parallel to the idea of Jesus as the living Word in the description in Shī'ī Islam of the imām as ... 'the speaking Qur'ān' and of the text of the Qur'ān as ... 'the silent Qur'ān.'" Marshall's observation is interesting, but he is not saying Jesus is an Imam and therefore this is an existing understanding. He is pointing out that a Muslim scholar pointed to the precedent within Shi'a Islam of comparing a revered person to the Qur'an. Ataie, who is Sunni, is making this observation which represents an evolution in understanding within Sunni Islam and perhaps Shi'a Islam as well.

those understandings. Formative-classical understandings suggest ʿĪsā had a unique birth, performed miracles with Allah’s permission, and was given a “revelation” known as the *Injīl* which may have been lost or corrupted. Muhammad, on the other hand, also lived a life of excellence and was given a “revelation” known as the Qur’an which Muslims understand to be the uncorrupted word of Allah still present with us. To suggest that ʿĪsā’s revelatory nature was like or less than Muhammad’s would not be problematic to formative-classical understandings. In this chapter, I have demonstrated that Ataie suggests that ʿĪsā’s revelatory nature is like Muhammad’s and, given his choice of words, perhaps greater in the sense that while Muhammad was the reflection of Allah’s word, ʿĪsā is the emanation of God’s word, the “perfected agent of God’s activity in the world.” He also appeared to offer a comparison of ʿĪsā to the Qur’an as a revelatory word; an observation that will be reinforced in the next section as Ataie makes a more direct comparison of ʿĪsā’s speech to the Qur’an’s Speech.

I will now visit ideas from Ataie and other primary sources who offer understandings of ʿĪsā’s revelatory nature that create tension with formative-classical understandings. I observe that ʿĪsā is evolving within the Islamic narrative, according to contemporary Muslim authors, and leaving the category of “prophet of Islam” to enter the category of “divine revelation from Allah;” *ʿĪsā is the living revelation of Allah*. I will discuss the significance of this categorical movement after visiting statements by the authors that substantiate the premise.

6.2.4 Ongoing “word”

Akyol says, “Legenhausen apparently builds upon the tradition started by Tabarsi (d. 1153 CE) that Jesus may be the Word of God not as ‘merely a creative word, but also a word of revelation.’”⁵⁰⁹ Shaykh Ṭabarsī was a Shite scholar in the 12th century CE who produced a commentary on the Qur’an that Muslim scholars, both Shi’a and Sunnī, consider a leading work in the field of tafsīr.⁵¹⁰ Musa Abdul says of him, “Tabarsi’s bias for his school of thought, the Shi’ah, can be traced in his conclusions on certain verses; this is natural; he did not however, overdo it. Nevertheless, he shows in this work that he was an independent thinker. On some issues, one finds him taking a conclusion different from that of the Shi’ah.”⁵¹¹ As an “independent thinker” and one who reached “different” conclusions from those of his contemporaries, I need to examine what Ṭabarsī said about Jesus as Allah’s “word” that became the “tradition” influencing Akyol and Legenhausen.

Akyol says, “Shiite scholar, Shaykh Tabarsi, had discussed the meaning of Jesus’ speech in the cradle and suggested that ‘God had perfected his reason even at that age ... revealing to him what he uttered.’ Accordingly, Jesus was not merely receiving occasional revelations like other prophets; every word of his was revelation by God.”⁵¹² Ṭabarsī

⁵⁰⁹ Akyol, *The Islamic Jesus*, 164.

⁵¹⁰ Musa Qladipupọ Ajilogba Abdul, *The Qur’an: Tabarsi’s Commentary his Approach to Theological Issues*. (McGill University), Abstract.

⁵¹¹ Ibid, 70.

⁵¹² Akyol, *The Islamic Jesus*, 164.

suggested that “every” word of ʿĪsā is revelation, not just his *Injīl*. Akyol says, “In this view, unlike the Prophet Muhammad who was a normal human being who just occasionally received God’s revelation, Jesus becomes the revelation itself. The parallel to Jesus in Islam is not the Prophet Muhammad, but the Qur’ān.”⁵¹³ Perhaps Akyol is going beyond what Ṭabarsī intended, but he reinforces his conclusion by quoting Muhammad-Husayn Ṭabāṭabā’i (d. 1981 CE), “Jesus himself is the ‘gospel ... if the revelation given to Jesus was conveyed to his followers through his life, in word and deed, this would explain the use of the term *Injīl* in the Qur’ān for both the divine revelation and for the gospels used by the Christians.”⁵¹⁴ Akyol, citing Ṭabarsī and Ṭabāṭabā’i, makes a remarkable statement comparing ʿĪsā, “who is himself the gospel,” to the Qur’an and not the Prophet in revelatory nature. Perhaps Akyol recognized the tension this may create with formative-classical understandings, leading him to qualify his statement by quoting al-Rāzī: “Al-Rāzī offered the possibility that ‘God commanded Gabriel to be with Jesus in all his circumstances.’ This can also be a way of understanding how Jesus could be the Word of God in the sense of always speaking the words of God; the transmitter of the revelation was with him all the time.”⁵¹⁵ This qualification associates God’s Spirit

⁵¹³ Ibid.

⁵¹⁴ Ibid. Akyol refers to Legenhausen, “Jesus as Kalimat Allah [The Word of God],” 20. Legenhausen quotes Muhammad-Husayn Ṭabāṭabā’i, an Iranian scholar, theorist, philosopher, and a prominent thinker of modern Shi’a Islam.

⁵¹⁵ Mahmoud M. Ayoub, *The House of Imran*, vol. 2 of *The Qur’an and Its Interpreters* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), p. 177. Also see Akyol, *The Islamic Jesus*, 170.

(Gabriel) with Jesus to explain his ability to always speak the words of God. This may temper the implication of Akyol's previous statements for some readers, but it does not remove the implied comparison of Jesus to the Qur'an. This represents significant drift in understanding of the revelatory stature of 'Īsā from formative-classical understandings and creates tension with those understandings.

Ataie has a similar understanding, "Jesus' speech is God's speech because he is the sanctified and guided word of God."⁵¹⁶ Ataie says every word of 'Īsā is Allah's words, and he elaborates, "Christ is the incarnation of the Logos in the sense that he is a perfect reflection of the Father at the level of flesh and blood; those who see the Son see the Father because the Son perpetually witnesses the vision of the Father and mediates this vision for others."⁵¹⁷ Ataie sees 'Īsā in a similar manner to Akyol, that every word of 'Īsā is Allah's word, not just his *Injīl*. Ataie furthers the idea that 'Īsā is more like the Qur'an than the prophets when he says, "Christ is the economical manifestation of an exalted pre-eternal and impersonal Decree of God who speaks the words of God and is thus the created expressed speech, just as the expressions of the Qur'an are the economical manifestations of Divine Pre-Eternal Speech."⁵¹⁸ The expressions of Christ, which are not limited to his *Injīl*, are "pre-eternal" words of God just as the expressions of the Qur'an are the "Pre-Eternal Speech" of God. I discussed earlier that it is difficult to imagine this

⁵¹⁶ Ataie, *Authenticating the Johannine Injil*, 328.

⁵¹⁷ Ibid, 153.

⁵¹⁸ Ibid, 426.

description being applied to any other prophet given their potential for “mistakes.” I have discussed Ataie’s use of the word “reflection” to describe Muhammad’s likeness of God’s actions on earth. Above, Ataie uses the word “perfect reflection” to describe ʿĪsā which must be contrasted with his use of “reflection” when speaking of Muhammad. This creates tension with formative-classical understandings.

With one exception, Aslan, who will be discussed in a later theme, none of the primary sources acknowledges contradicting formative-classical understandings of the Jesus of Islam. They attempt to situate their comments in deference to the superiority of Muhammad as the final Prophet. But some of their statements leave the reader wondering how ʿĪsā could be surpassed regarding the appreciation the authors bestow on him. An example is a statement made by Ataie, “Christ is the pure action of God upon the earth.”⁵¹⁹ This implies everything ʿĪsā did and said was the “pure” image of Allah’s deeds, words, and character. If true, this does not conflict with formative-classical understandings of ʿĪsā, which declared him to be sinless, but it does place ʿĪsā in a unique position relative to all the other prophets who were able to make mistakes.

Saritoprak, who argues that *nuzūl* ʿĪsā does not necessarily have to be a physical descent but could be an ongoing spiritual descent, brings additional insight to the discussion above. He says, “It can be argued that the descent of Jesus as narrated by the Prophet can be understood as a spiritual descent and not necessarily a physical one.

⁵¹⁹ Ataie, *Authenticating the Johannine Injil*, 227.

Accordingly, Jesus' descent from the heavens can imply that God will send him out of mercy. Such a descent will strengthen the spiritual lives of people."⁵²⁰ For Saritoprak, 'Īsā is always present with Allah's followers (because he can come and go from Allah to His followers as sent by Allah due to the spiritual nature of his *nuzūl*) to bring words of encouragement to strengthen them in their spiritual journeys, past, present, and future. Saritoprak, along with Ataie and Akyol, understands 'Īsā to be a living revelation of Allah, speaking Allah's words, and always present with His servants. This presents a being that has a unique position with both Allah and His ummah.

Formative-classical understandings, as discussed in Chapter 1.1, convey the view that 'Īsā was sent to serve a particular people (the Jews) at a particular place in time (1st century Palestine) with a specific message (the *Injīl*). Chapters 5 and 6 have presented an 'Īsā who exhibits variation from formative-classical understandings. 'Īsā's evolved persona enhances appreciation of him and creates tension in the Islamic narrative through perceived conflict with formative-classical understandings, as described above. The next chapter will demonstrate how 'Īsā's eschatological role has provided more opportunity to venerate him as a prophet of Islam and has continued to add tension to the question, "Who is the greater prophet?" This chapter has proposed that 'Īsā is evolving within Islam in both the nature of his prophethood and the nature of his revelation.

⁵²⁰ Saritoprak, *Islam's Jesus*, 36.

6.3 Conclusions

Chapter 6 introduces two themes related to 'Īsā's nature as the Word of Allah. I discussed earlier that this was a topic that lacked unanimity amongst Islamic scholars regarding its full scope of meaning and therefore offered opportunity for variations in understandings. The primary sources do not disappoint in this regard. Two themes are presented. Theme 3 is about the *nature of the prophethood* of Muhammad and 'Īsā and provides understandings from the authors that suggest the *nature of 'Īsā's prophethood* is evolving such that 'Īsā is encroaching upon Muhammad's status as the superior and final prophet. Theme 4 is about the *nature of the revelations* of Muhammad and 'Īsā and suggests that the *nature of 'Īsā's revelations* is evolving such that 'Īsā's "word," which includes every spoken word, is also an "eternal word" encroaching upon Muhammad's status as the only prophet through whom an "eternal word" was revealed. To illustrate this, we discussed that Ataie recalled al-Ghazālī's analogy enabling his reader to think he is comparing 'Īsā to the Qur'an. Another example is Ataie and Akyol's view that every word of 'Īsā is Allah's word, not just his *Injil*. Ataie furthers the idea that 'Īsā is more like the Qur'an than the prophets when he says, "Christ ... speaks the words of God and is thus the created expressed speech, just as the expressions of the Qur'ān are the economical manifestations of Divine Pre-Eternal Speech."⁵²¹ Comparing 'Īsā to the

⁵²¹ Ataie, *Authenticating the Johannine Injil*, 426.

Qur'an creates tension in the Islamic narrative regarding the preeminence of Muhammad's prophetic role because it suggests that 'Īsā transcends his prophet role to that of eternal word of God, i.e., he is categorically assigned to both prophet and the eternal word of God whereas Muhammad and the other prophets remain with the category of prophet while occasionally revealing the word of God. Chapters 5 and 6 introduce changes in understandings of the Jesus of Islam by the primary sources. The title of Chapter 7, "Prophet of Hope – Future and Present," suggests an attribute of 'Īsā that may be unique among the prophets and provides the opportunity for the tension described above to increase.

Chapter 7 - Prophet of Hope - Future and Present

A 2012 poll conducted by the Washington-based Pew Research Center showed that roughly half of the Muslims in twenty-two Muslim-majority countries believe not only that Jesus will return, but also that his return is ‘imminent’—that it will happen in their lifetime.⁵²² It may be that Muslim interest in ‘Īsā’s Second Coming (*nuzūl* ‘Īsā) has focused the primary sources on ‘Īsā’s eschatological role resulting in two themes to examine for potential movements from formative-classical understandings. Theme 5 is *‘Īsā’s eschatological role heralds the climax of human history*, and Theme 6 is *‘Īsā is the ultimate hope for Islam - a prophet for this time, for Muslims, Christians, and Jews*. Like the two preceding themes, these are closely related yet distinct. The first, ‘Īsā’s eschatological role, encompasses the actions and accomplishments of ‘Īsā in his Second Coming. The second, ‘Īsā as the ultimate hope for Islam, is a result of some of the authors’ perspectives that *nuzūl* ‘Īsā is an allegorical or metaphorical descent, instead of physical, and occurring regularly in the lives of Muslims and those who would listen to ‘Īsā’s words. The first theme involves ‘Īsā’s *future* accomplishments and the second relates to his *present* activities. I will discuss *nuzūl* ‘Īsā highlighting statements from the primary sources that may represent movements from formative-classical understandings. I will visit an idea from some of the authors that *nuzūl* ‘Īsā is not a physical but an

⁵²² Pew Research Center’s Religion & Public Life Project, “The World’s Muslims: Unity and Diversity,” August 9, 2012., 58, 61.

allegorical or metaphorical descent and see how this stimulates the view that *ʿĪsā is a prophet for this time, for Muslims, Christians, and Jews* (Theme 6).

7.1 Theme 5 - ʿĪsā’s eschatological role heralds the climax of human history

In this chapter, and particularly this theme, I will address ʿĪsā’s role in his Second Coming, *nuzūl* ʿĪsā. Formative-classical understandings suggest that in his Second Coming ʿĪsā will kill all Christians who do not accept the correct (Muslim) belief about him, help to make the world one community of Islam, kill the Dajjāl (anti-Christ) who will attempt to stop him, and remain on the earth for forty years before dying a natural death and being buried beside Muhammad.⁵²³ There is another important figure in these events, the Mahdī. Sunnī and Shi’a differ on the identity of this person, as discussed in Chapter 1.1. This chapter will reflect Sunnī understandings. The relationship of ʿĪsā to the Mahdī, as a helper and destroyer of the Dajjāl, is generally shared among formative-classical understandings with other details being less clear like whether ʿĪsā and the Mahdī are one and the same person, to be discussed later. Formative-classical understandings are not definitive regarding the Second Coming of ʿĪsā because the event is obscure in the Qur’an.⁵²⁴ It is the Hadīth that provides most of the information on this unique event in Islamic eschatology.

⁵²³ Anawati, “ISA,” 525.

⁵²⁴ Ibid.

This theme will address *nuzūl* ʿĪsā as a catalyst for world peace, a time when Jesus will be a world ruler, an affirmation of Islam, the zenith of peace on earth, and a metaphorical event. Using the formative-classical understanding above, I examine ideas expressed by the primary sources which are not in conflict with formative-classical understandings but complement those understandings in ways that broaden the appreciation of ʿĪsā.

The title of Theme 5 comes from a statement by Harpci, “He [ʿĪsā] will return from the heavenly places heralding the climax of human history.”⁵²⁵ This agrees with formative-classical understandings of *nuzūl* ʿĪsā, but what are these understandings? In Chapter 1.1, I discussed that formative-classical understandings do not concede that ʿĪsā died on the cross, but that someone died in his place while he was taken up to be with Allah. Muhammad rejected the crucifixion of ʿĪsā and affirmed his ascension “in a birth-body, not a glorified body.”⁵²⁶ I discussed Muhammad’s night journey (*al-Isrā’ wal-Mi’rāj*) where he encountered ʿĪsā in both flesh and spirit in heaven.⁵²⁷ In summary, formative-classical understandings believe ʿĪsā is with Allah today awaiting a return to earth where he will die a natural death and experience resurrection like the other prophets. This second return of ʿĪsā, *nuzūl* ʿĪsā, is the context of the next two themes and is a major component of Islamic eschatological theology.

⁵²⁵ Harpci, *Muhammad Speaking of the Messiah*, xv.

⁵²⁶ Anawati, “ISA,” 525.

⁵²⁷ Ibn Taymiyya, *Majmu’at al-Fatawa*, 4:316, 322–23, 328–29; as cited in Saritoprak, *Islam’s Jesus*, 107.

7.1.1 Catalyst for world peace

Harpci says, “According to the Hadīth, the Messiah will inaugurate a time of prosperity and abundance during which the divisions between the People of the Book and Muslims will be eliminated, and the true religion will be held by all.”⁵²⁸ I assess Harpci to be the primary source most closely aligned with formative-classical understandings. Yet within this statement is an appreciation of ʿĪsā that is difficult to ignore despite its formative-classical foundations. ʿĪsā, in his eschatological role, accomplishes something unique among all other prophets; he eliminates “divisions” within Islam and the entire world becomes Muslim. Harpci’s statement is not a change from formative-classical understandings since it is based on hadīth sayings. However, due to the perceived imminence of *nuzūl* ʿĪsā, it represents an appreciation of ʿĪsā that enhances formative-classical understandings, for example, as *nuzūl* ʿĪsā appears imminent and the task of uniting the world under “the true religion” seems more difficult than ever before, anticipation of ʿĪsā’s expected accomplishments results in appreciation of ʿĪsā not previously articulated in formative-classical understandings.

Saritoprak, who considers himself to be a scholar of *nuzūl* ʿĪsā, agrees with Harpci saying, “Jesus’ spirituality will be seen as in sync with Islamic spirituality. Then the true religion that comes from the convergence of Islam and Christianity will be powerful.

⁵²⁸ Harpci, *Muhammad Speaking of the Messiah*, 197.

Accordingly, the materialistic philosophies will be too weak to fight the true religion.”⁵²⁹ Saritoprak believes ‘Īsā will unite the world’s religions under Islam, an achievement no prophet has accomplished before. He continues, “It is understood from the overall tone of the hadīth that the Prophet spoke of Jesus’ descent as good news and as fulfillment of hope for Muslims against the horrific actions of the Antichrist.”⁵³⁰ Harpci and Saritoprak concur that *nuzūl* ‘Īsā is the ultimate hope for Muslims according to formative-classical understandings and demonstrate an excitement for the event through their choice of the words “prosperity,” “abundance,” “good news,” and “fulfillment of hope,” to describe ‘Īsā’s accomplishments in his Second Coming. While this is not a departure from formative-classical understandings, it represents an appreciation of ‘Īsā and excitement for his person and accomplishments not previously articulated by those understandings, due to the perceived nearness of *nuzūl* ‘Īsā.

7.1.2 World ruler

Akyol says, “The Mahdī will die at some point, but Jesus will continue to rule, as Jews, Christians, and Muslims will be united under his leadership. The entire earth will be filled with justice, just as it was filled with injustice and oppression.”⁵³¹ Saritoprak summarizes Riḍā as saying, “The descent of Jesus means that people will return to the

⁵²⁹ Saritoprak, *Islam’s Jesus*, 36.

⁵³⁰ *Ibid*, 45.

⁵³¹ Akyol, *The Islamic Jesus*, 188.

Qur'ān and submit to the spirit of Islamic sharia."⁵³² Akyol concludes, "God will send the only person on earth who can defeat the False Messiah—the True Messiah. Jesus, who is alive in heaven, will descend to earth, literally from the sky, first to Damascus and then to Jerusalem."⁵³³ This indicates drift in the role of 'Īsā in Islamic eschatology; 'Īsā has evolved from victor over Islam's enemies and helper to the Mahdī, which represent formative-classical understandings, to subjugator of mankind's enemies uniting them under Islam and securing an enduring peace that outlasts the Mahdī, if the Mahdī is someone other than 'Īsā himself. Akyol says, "[He is] the only person on earth who can defeat the False Messiah." Saritoprak agrees and says, "According to a saying of the Prophet narrated by one of his closest companions, Huraira, 'no one will be able to kill the Antichrist except Jesus, the son of Mary, peace be upon him.' After this victory the world will be full of justice and peace."⁵³⁴ While Akyol's and Saritoprak's comments do not conflict with formative-classical understandings, their appreciation of 'Īsā, displayed in their description of his accomplishments and unique qualifications, illumines formative-classical understandings and creates the potential for tension in the Islamic narrative regarding the importance of other Muslim figures, like Muhammad, and especially regarding 'Īsā and the Mahdī.

⁵³² Riḍā, *Tafsir al-Manar*, 1954 ed., 3; as cited in Saritoprak, *Islam's Jesus*, 118.

⁵³³ Akyol, *The Islamic Jesus*, 188.

⁵³⁴ Abū Huraira, Al-Tayālīsī, *Al-Musnad*, 327; as cited in Saritoprak, *Islam's Jesus*, 97.

Saritoprak says, “In the Islamic eschatological scenario, Jesus and the Islamic messianic figure that represents the Prophet of Islam [Mahdī] are hand in hand against ‘the Liar,’ or the false prophet known as the Antichrist. Both share the final victory over the Antichrist.”⁵³⁵ Does “sharing the final victory” suggest equality in position or authority? A hadīth of Muslim ibn al-Ḥajjāj (d. 875 CE) says, “Jesus son of Mary would then descend and their (Muslims’) commander would invite him to come and lead them in prayer, but he would say: ‘No ... this is the honor from Allah for this Ummah.’”⁵³⁶ The meaning of Jesus refusing the invitation of the Mahdī to pray first is debated and relevant to the question. Al-Suyūṭī aligns with formative-classical understandings as saying that Jesus praying behind the Mahdī signifies Jesus’ recognition of the Mahdī as superior in status. Al-Suyūṭī says believing that Jesus has a higher status, while praying behind the Mahdī, “is a bizarre opinion since the issue of prayer of Jesus behind al-Mahdī has been proven strongly via numerous authentic traditions from the Messenger of Allah, who is the most truthful.”⁵³⁷ Saritoprak disagrees with al-Suyūṭī and says, “Al-Taftāzānī reiterates that even after his descent Jesus will still remain a prophet of God and will still be higher than the Mahdī.”⁵³⁸ Al-Taftāzānī derived his conclusion from hadīth where ʿĪsā asked the Mahdī to lead the prayer when they met at the Umayyad Mosque. Al-Taftāzānī

⁵³⁵ Saritoprak, *Islam’s Jesus*, 3.

⁵³⁶ Muslim, 1:293.

⁵³⁷ Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī, *Nuzool Isa ibn Maryam Akhir al-Zaman*, 56. Citation taken from “A Shi’ite Encyclopedia,” November 12, 2013. <https://www.al-islam.org/shiite-encyclopedia>

⁵³⁸ Al-Taftāzānī, *Sharh al-Maqasid*, 5:314; as cited in Saritoprak, *Islam’s Jesus*, 87.

did not interpret this event as previously understood; that the Mahdī was superior to ʿĪsā in rank which is why he leads the prayer. Rather, al-Taftāzānī suggested that the fact that ʿĪsā asked the Mahdī to lead the prayer suggests that it was ʿĪsā that was superior in rank; else it would have gone uncontested for the Mahdī to lead the prayer.⁵³⁹ While formative-classical understandings assign a significant eschatological role to ʿĪsā, they do not revere him as Akyol and Saritoprak do through their statements and ideas above. This represents departure in understandings from formative-classical understandings.

Other comments from Saritoprak demonstrate his enthusiasm for *nuzūl* ʿĪsā. I discussed above that after ʿĪsā defeats the Dajjāl, he may remain on the earth for forty years before dying a natural death and being buried beside Muhammad.⁵⁴⁰ Saritoprak comments on the impact ʿĪsā will have upon the peoples of the earth, even after his death saying, “Those who help and follow him [after death] will generally be known as ‘Muslims,’ but they will not necessarily be only Muslims, they will also be Christians, Jews, and adherents of other religious traditions ... the narrative is inclusive, helpers of Jesus are praised in Islam, in both a historical and an eschatological sense.”⁵⁴¹ Saritoprak says that in his eschatological role, ʿĪsā will have followers that are not Muslim in the strictest sense of the word. They will “help” and “follow” Jesus and in this sense be “Muslim,” but they will still retain their identity as Christians, Jews, and other faith traditions. Saritoprak

⁵³⁹ Saritoprak, *Islam’s Jesus*, 87.

⁵⁴⁰ Anawati, “ISA,” 525.

⁵⁴¹ Saritoprak, *Islam’s Jesus*, 81.

says this is an “inclusive” narrative. If Saritoprak is correct, ‘Īsā will have an impact on people of all faith traditions. I might argue that Muhammad’s life had this same impact until this day. But the impact Saritoprak is assigning to the life and death of ‘Īsā is more inclusive, complete, immediate, and long-lasting. While these comments do not conflict with formative-classical understandings, they do illuminate them in ways that demonstrate drift towards increased appreciation of ‘Īsā and his eschatological role.

7.1.3 *Nuzūl* ‘Īsā - affirmation of Islam and zenith of peace on earth

Saritoprak continues his commentary on the events accompanying ‘Īsā’s return, “It can be argued that when the Prophet said that Jesus will come as a just ruler, he emphasized the importance of justice and peace on earth. If the trend toward dialogue and cooperation leads to justice and peace in our world, [then] it will mean the fulfillment of the messages of both Muhammad and Jesus.”⁵⁴² Saritoprak’s words suggest that Muhammad’s message, and therefore Islam, will be affirmed by ‘Īsā’s eschatological role, i.e., “if” conditions trend towards justice and peace and ‘Īsā rules as a just ruler with peace on earth, “then” both Muhammad and Jesus’ messages will be fulfilled affirming the truth of Islam. Formative-Classical understandings regard ‘Īsā’s eschatological accomplishments as a fait accompli; there is no “if” regarding conditions trending towards justice and peace for ‘Īsā’s rule. By suggesting a conditional outcome instead of a

⁵⁴² Ibid, 161.

predetermined outcome, Saritoprak assigns to ʿĪsā a significance that complements formative-classical understandings by connecting the affirmation of Islamic Scripture with ʿĪsā’s eschatological role.

Saritoprak connects the descent of Jesus with Muhammad’s prediction of a time of unprecedented peace saying, “This eschatological scenario in the Islamic tradition will find its zenith in the descent of Jesus, a symbol of peace foretold by the Prophet of Islam more than 1,400 years ago.”⁵⁴³ According to Saritoprak, “dialogue, cooperation, justice and peace in our world” will reach its “zenith” during ʿĪsā’s reign on earth. The word “zenith” assigns to ʿĪsā a unique attribute. “Zenith” implies no other prophet or person can bring about the level of peace on earth that ʿĪsā will achieve in his return. Connecting ʿĪsā’s eschatological accomplishments with the affirmation of Muhammad’s messages and using “zenith” to describe the peace ʿĪsā will bring to the earth complements formative-classical understandings by suggesting ʿĪsā’s accomplishments in his eschatological role will be matchless in Islamic history.

7.1.4 *Nuzūl* ʿĪsā - metaphorical event

Saritoprak raises a significant idea when he says, “It should be noted that because of the similar roles of Jesus and the Mahdī, there has been confusion about the role of each. Some early scholars of Islamic theology have even claimed that there will be no

⁵⁴³ Ibid, 74.

Mahdī, that the eschatological figure called the Mahdī is in fact Jesus himself.”⁵⁴⁴ This understanding is significant because it creates the opportunity to consider *nuzūl* ‘Īsā a metaphorical or allegorical event rather than a physical one since the complication of a returning Mahdī is eliminated, i.e., one does not have to wait for the appearance of a Mahdī on the earth to precipitate the events of *nuzūl* ‘Īsā. Several of the primary sources have this perspective regarding *nuzūl* ‘Īsā. Drifts in understandings of *nuzūl* ‘Īsā towards non-literal understandings can result in themes not articulated by formative-classical texts and represent significant movements as the next section will demonstrate. This completes the discussion on the *future* accomplishments of ‘Īsā in his eschatological role. I now consider some of ‘Īsā’s *present* activities resulting from his eschatological position in Islamic Scripture.

7.2 Theme 6 - ‘Īsā is the ultimate hope for Islam - a prophet for this time, for Muslims, Christians, and Jews

In the previous section I discussed the future accomplishments of ‘Īsā in his eschatological role. In this section I will discuss the potential for present accomplishment; that *nuzūl* ‘Īsā could be a reality today, that Jesus could be a prophet for this hour, that Jesus could bring renewal to Islam today and that *nuzūl* ‘Īsā could be a spiritual event as

⁵⁴⁴ Ibid, 88. Also see Gabriel Said Reynolds, “Jesus, the Qā’im and the End of the World,” *Rivista Degli Studi Orientali* 75, no. 1/4 (2001): 55–86. Reynolds says that Sunnī Islam has three separate views of the Mahdī: He is a political leader, a messianic figure who will gather Muslims under one rule before the descent of Jesus, and he is none other than Jesus himself (62-64).

well as an allegorical or metaphorical event. I will distinguish spiritual from allegorical or metaphorical and highlight the implications.

The idea that *nuzūl* ʿĪsā could be metaphorical or allegorical instead of a physical event was introduced in the previous section and made plausible by the suggestion that ʿĪsā and the final Mahdī could be the same person. Saritoprak affirms this possibility when he says, “It seems that the hadīth containing extraordinary descriptions of future events, including Jesus’ descent, the emergence of the Antichrist, and the emergence of the Mahdī, should all be taken in an allegorical way.”⁵⁴⁵ Akyol, who previously discussed a literal view, subscribes to this idea and says, “Yet there is a third view as well: to accept the Second Coming of Jesus not literally but allegorically, not as a supernatural miracle, but as a natural transformation in the world—and within the world of Islam.”⁵⁴⁶ Harpci ends his thesis with these words, “We have seen how within Islam scholars populate a wide spectrum of thinking about the end of the world, with some believing in a literal, personal Messiah and others believing in a messianic age.”⁵⁴⁷ Harpci saw the events of *nuzūl* ʿĪsā as allegorical rather than literal, referencing ʿĪsā’s frequent use of allegory to teach; ʿĪsā’s frequent use of parables, which were short stories or comparisons, were not intended to be taken literally but symbolically to teach a lesson.⁵⁴⁸ Akyol expressed a

⁵⁴⁵ Ibid, 98.

⁵⁴⁶ Akyol, *The Islamic Jesus*, 192.

⁵⁴⁷ Harpci, *Muhammad Speaking of the Messiah*, 191.

⁵⁴⁸ Ibid, 192.

similar view above when he said that we should accept the Second Coming of Jesus “not literally but allegorically, as a natural transformation in the world.” He implies that the narrative around the Second Coming of ‘Īsā is a story teaching a truth, not a literal event.

It is reasonable to infer that if one believes *nuzūl* ‘Īsā could be a metaphorical or allegorical event instead of a physical event, then Muslims and the world do not have to wait for the end of the world to listen to and follow the teachings of ‘Īsā. It is possible that ‘Īsā’s return could be happening now. Therefore, all the benefits and blessings of *nuzūl* ‘Īsā discussed above could be a potentiality in the present, for example, if ‘Īsā’s return is allegorical then he is not constrained by a physical body and therefore can come and go between heaven and earth as he pleases to accomplish his eschatological role, and he may be doing this now. Whereas the Prophet’s “night journey” was a one-time event, ‘Īsā’s “journey” could be regular, interceding for the Muslim people. The statements below from Akyol and Saritoprak are interpreted considering these understandings; that ‘Īsā’s return is not a literal event, but allegorical or metaphorical. Rendering ‘Īsā’s return as allegorical or metaphorical can lead to understandings that create tension with formative-classical understandings. The statements by the primary sources below confirm this view.

7.2.1 *Nuzūl* ‘Īsā - a reality today

If ‘Īsā’s return can be an on-going event, it can be happening now, bringing blessings to the ummah and individual Muslims. Akyol grasps this idea and presents a

Jesus that can bring about significant reform in Islam. He says, “For more impact, perhaps we can recall that Jesus, a great prophet of Islam, called for the exact same kind of reform in Judaism at a time when Jews were exactly like us. Jesus can, in other words, become a source of inspiration for the much-sought transformation in Islam.”⁵⁴⁹ He believes the reform that Jesus brought in his first appearance might be appropriate to Islam today. He specifies the reform he has in mind, “I believe that the teachings of Jesus to his fellow Jews can today give us Muslims reformist guidance especially in two key matters. The first is the Kingdom of God, which Muslims would call the Caliphate. The second is religious law, which Muslims would call the shariah.”⁵⁵⁰ He adds, “Islam in the modern era needed the exact reform that Judaism needed at the time of Jesus.”⁵⁵¹ Akyol believes that looking backwards in history could be informative to Muslims today. He believes that because ‘Īsā’s return is allegorical or metaphorical the ummah can expect the benefits and blessings of his return today. Akyol credits Toynbee as one of the first to note the similarity between Muslims living in a world dominated by the West and the Jews living in a Roman world.⁵⁵² Akyol was quoted earlier as saying, “Muslims are not living in the context of seventh-century Mecca and Medina ... we are rather living in the context of first-century Nazareth and Jerusalem ... therefore, we need a ‘prophetic example’ fit for

⁵⁴⁹ Akyol, *The Islamic Jesus*, 214.

⁵⁵⁰ Ibid, 206.

⁵⁵¹ Ibid, 193. The “reform” to which Akyol is referring was cited earlier when he quoted al-‘Aqqād, “Reform toward reason, free will, and spirituality rather than legalism.”

⁵⁵² Toynbee, *Civilization on Trial*, 181. Also see Akyol, *The Islamic Jesus*, 198.

the first-century drama. We need the method, and the message, of Jesus ... whose very 'return' is promised in our tradition." Akyol asserts that Islam's only hope for reform, to make Islam relevant to modernity and bring the Caliphate to the waiting world, is Jesus of Nazareth (ʿĪsā). He offers ideas that may attract Muslims to the person and teachings of the Jesus of Islam which could result in the belated reform of Islam that he asserts is ultimately desired by many Muslims as indicated by their expectation of ʿĪsā's imminent return, *nuzūl* ʿĪsā.⁵⁵³ These ideas include: That ʿĪsā, while not divine as Christians believe, was still "sinless and powerful ... somewhere between human beings and God ... one could suggest on the same level as angels;"⁵⁵⁴ ʿĪsā's eschatological role is exceptional, demonstrating that he is a prophet of "great power and glory;"⁵⁵⁵ while the Qur'an mentions the flaws of the other prophets, ʿĪsā "has no *zalla*, no mistake, no lapse. He is simply flawless;"⁵⁵⁶ ʿĪsā "was the Word of God in a higher sense than the mere 'creative Word,' [he] was a perfect man in union with God;"⁵⁵⁷ the Christian Gospels may be trusted to inform us of ʿĪsā and his teachings because "Jews and Christians 'corrupted' the

⁵⁵³ Akyol, *The Islamic Jesus*, 184. Also see Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project. "The World's Muslims: Unity and Diversity," August 9, 2012, 58, 66.

⁵⁵⁴ *Ibid*, 17, 165.

⁵⁵⁵ *Ibid*, 42.

⁵⁵⁶ *Ibid*, 163. It was cited earlier that Akyol says Adam ate the fruit of the forbidden tree, Moses hit a man and killed him, and Muhammad neglected a blind man searching for wisdom, which led to his censure by the Qur'an (Qur'an 80). He leaves the reader to conclude that ʿĪsā is unique in that he had no flaws from Akyol's perspective.

⁵⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 164. Akyol quotes Muslim commentators Ibn ʿAbbās, cousin of the Prophet, and Nisha-puri, a Persian Shi'a scholar of the fourteenth century as support for this statement.

interpretation of their scriptures, not their texts;”⁵⁵⁸ and ʿĪsā brings the Muslim world a new perspective on setting up the Kingdom of God (Caliphate) because “it is possible for Muslims to think ... that the Caliphate is not here or there, but within themselves.”⁵⁵⁹ Akyol closes his argument with these words, “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.”⁵⁶⁰

7.2.2 The prophet for this hour

Akyol defends his claims by relying on the previous teachings of Muslim scholars. He offers Egyptian scholar Abduh as a key pioneer in “Islamic Modernism,” specifically with the possibility that the Second Coming of ʿĪsā should be taken allegorically rather than literally.⁵⁶¹ Early twentieth century Egyptian scholar Ali Abdel Raziq (d. 1966 CE) and the Turkish scholar Seyyid Bey (d. 1925 CE) were early “reformist thinkers” who advanced the idea that a caliphate need not be a political one but could be about “advancing Islamic values under any state that grants Muslims security, dignity, and

⁵⁵⁸ Wood, *Christian Criticism, Islamic Proofs*, 25. Egyptian scholar Muhammad Abduh is quoted by Wood as saying, “the issue is corruption of meaning, not corruption of text.” Also see Akyol, *The Islamic Jesus*, 205.

⁵⁵⁹ Ibid, 210.

⁵⁶⁰ Ibid, 215.

⁵⁶¹ Ibid, 205. Akyol references Saritoprak, *Islam’s Jesus*, 117. Here, Saritoprak says “Abduh’s viewpoint that the descent of Jesus cannot be understood in a literal way but instead should be understood figuratively” and he cites Riḍā, *Tafsir al-Manar*, 1954 ed., 3:261.

freedom.”⁵⁶² Leaning on the legacy of Muslim scholars, past and present, Akyol advances his argument that the words of Jesus are far more authoritative than other prophets, and of the same revelatory nature as the Qur’an.⁵⁶³ Akyol’s Jesus is much more than an argument for the truth of Islam, he is as Khalidi asserts, “a living and vital moral voice demanding to be heard.”⁵⁶⁴

Akyol is saying that the Jesus of Islam is the prophet to lead Islam out of its “malaise” *today*. Akyol’s proposition represents significant variance from formative-classical understandings made possible by the idea that ‘Īsā and the Maḥdī may be one and the same and that the return of ‘Īsā could be metaphorical or allegorical, meaning it could be happening now. Perhaps the most powerful idea Akyol presents is that a caliphate, which is the way Muslims organized themselves for centuries after Muhammad’s death, is not something Muslims need to wait to experience literally, but it can be achieved within each Muslim’s heart *today*.

It is sufficient to understand that Islam experienced some of its most successful periods when it was organized as an ummah under a leader who had both political and religious authority, like Muhammad. Ovamir Anjum says, “Caliphate means Muslim unity

⁵⁶² Ibid, 208.

⁵⁶³ Ibid, 164. Akyol says, “Unlike the Prophet Muhammad who was a normal human being who just occasionally received God’s revelation, Jesus becomes the revelation itself. The parallel to Jesus in Islam is not the Prophet Muhammad, but the Qur’ān.” This suggests Jesus’ words are more authoritative than Muhammad’s in that only Muhammad’s revelation, the Qur’an, can be compared to Jesus’ words, whose everyday speech was revelation.

⁵⁶⁴ Khalidi, *The Muslim Jesus*, 45.

expressed in political terms and throughout history Muslims have agreed on the need for a political actualization of this idea; it not only predated Islamic law but was a condition of its birth and coherence.”⁵⁶⁵ The last recognized Caliphate ended with the fall of the Ottoman Empire in 1924. Since then, as Anjum says, “Muslims have agreed on the need for a political actualization of this idea.” Akyol says that Muslims need wait no longer, the Caliphate they have always longed for is available now and “the Caliphate is not here or there, but within themselves.”⁵⁶⁶ Further, as every caliphate requires a strong Muslim leader to teach the ummah the ways of Islam, the leader Akyol proposes is the Jesus of Islam. He says, “We need the method, and the message, of Jesus ... whose very ‘return’ is promised in our tradition.” And Akyol believes that return is now, and Jesus can speak to the heart of every Muslim who will follow his teachings. He says, “Jesus emphasized this key matter [reform of the heart] probably more than another Jewish rabbi, or teacher, a term repeatedly used for him in the Gospels, to the extent of calling for ‘a revolution in spiritual life.’ That is probably the reason why, while his teaching was grounded in Judaism, it also offered a spiritual vision that transcended religious boundaries, to inspire souls among other God-fearers, or Gentile monotheists.”⁵⁶⁷ Akyol’s belief that the

⁵⁶⁵ Ovamir Anjum, “Who Wants the Caliphate? | Yaqeen Institute for Islamic Research,” 2019. Dr. Ovamir Anjum is the Imam Khattab Endowed Chair of Islamic Studies at the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies at the University of Toledo.

⁵⁶⁶ Akyol, *The Islamic Jesus*, 210.

⁵⁶⁷ Joseph Jacobs, Kaufmann Kohler, Richard Gottheil, and Samuel Krauss, “Jesus of Nazareth,” in *The Jewish Encyclopedia* (New York: Funk and Wagnalls Company, 1906), vol. 7, 163. The Jewish Encyclopedia credits Jesus for promoting “a revolution in spiritual life ... [which] was by no means a novelty in Jewish religious development, the Prophets and Rabbis had continuously and consistently insisted upon the inner

Caliphate can be experienced within the hearts of Muslims today is a significant shift from formative-classical understandings; that the return of ʿĪsā and the worldwide Caliphate are literal events to be accomplished during the time of the final Imam or Mahdī.

Repeating Akyol's earlier statement, "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."⁵⁶⁸ He adds, "The idea that a prophet other than Muhammad can offer any guide to Muslims is not as unorthodox as it may first sound."⁵⁶⁹ Akyol presents a Jesus of Islam that, in his opinion, is the most relevant prophet of Islam to the ummah today. He is *the ultimate hope for Islam - a prophet for this time, for Muslims, Christians, and Jews* (Theme 6).

7.2.3 Renewer of Islam

Saritoprak shares Akyol's enthusiasm for *nuzūl* ʿĪsā as an allegorical or metaphorical event and demonstrates significant departure from formative-classical understandings. Saritoprak says Riḍā argued, "The descent of Jesus means that people will return to the Qur'ān and submit to the spirit of Islamic sharia."⁵⁷⁰ Saritoprak

motive with which pious deeds should be performed, as the well-known passages in Isa. i. and Micah vi. sufficiently indicate." Akyol comments in Akyol, *The Islamic Jesus*, 25.

⁵⁶⁸ Akyol, *The Islamic Jesus*, 215.

⁵⁶⁹ Ibid, 203. Akyol says, "In particular, Moses has been referenced quite frequently in modern Muslim literature, especially with regard to his bravery against the pharaoh, with which secular dictators of the Middle East have often been equated."

⁵⁷⁰ Riḍā, *Tafsir al-Manar*, 1954 ed., 3; as cited in Saritoprak, *Islam's Jesus*, 118.

comments further, ““It seems that both Abduh and his student Rashid Rida think of Jesus as a renewer of Islamic law. Jesus is expected to come and spark a great renewal of Islam.”⁵⁷¹ If Jesus’ coming will spark a great renewal of Islam and Jesus’ coming does not have to be literal, then according to Akyol this renewal of Islam could occur now. Akyol says it could begin *today* in every Muslim’s heart. Saritoprak also believes important achievements could be possible *today* if *nuzūl* ‘Īsā is an allegorical or metaphorical event. He says, “There will be an alliance between Muslims and Christians. In this alliance the spiritual leaders of Christianity and Islam will be united in their struggle against the non-believing or the irreligious. Nursi predicts that by this union ‘the true religion of God will be strengthened.’ The Republican Brotherhood movement founded by Maḥmūd Muhammad Tāhā considers the return of Jesus to be ‘the second message of Islam.’”⁵⁷² Tāhā (d. 1985 CE) used “second message of Islam” to refer to the Meccan verses which he said represented the ideal religion of Islam which would be revived when humanity had matured to receive them, and he used “first message of Islam” to refer to the Medinan verses from which the sharia was derived to govern the ummah today.⁵⁷³ Saritoprak merges Nursi’s vision of an alliance by Muslims and Christians and Tāhā’s interpretation

⁵⁷¹ Saritoprak, *Islam’s Jesus*, 116. As one of the modern exponents of the interpretive approach, Muhammad Abduh speaks of the spirit of Jesus that will prevail over a materialistic world.

⁵⁷² Nursi, “Mektubat,” 347; Nursi, “Kastamonu Lahikası,” 1615; Nursi, “Emirdağ Lahikası,” 1704; and *The Republican Brothers*, “The Return of Christ;” as cited in Saritoprak, *Islam’s Jesus*, 82. For more information on Tāhā and his thought, see Maḥmūd Muhammad Tāhā, *The Second Message of Islam*, 1st edition, Contemporary Issues in the Middle East, (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1987).

⁵⁷³ Maḥmūd Muhammad Tāhā, *The Second Message of Islam*, 1st edition, Contemporary Issues in the Middle East, (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1987), 46, 124.

of the “second message of Islam,” the “Meccan verses” which The Republican Brotherhood believes are fulfilled in the Second Coming of ‘Īsā, to propose that if *nuzūl* ‘Īsā is not literal, then the “renewal of Islam” could be imminent. Saritoprak suggests it is possible for Christians and Muslims to begin working together to unite the world and sees the return of Jesus as a metaphorical “second message of Islam” calling the ummah to unite with Christians to unite the world in submission to Allah. These are ideas made possible in the present day by the non-literal approach to the return of Jesus.

Saritoprak quotes al-Qurṭūbī who said, “There will be followers of Jesus in an eschatological sense as well ... the Prophet says, ‘Surely, Jesus the Messiah will find some people from among my community [as helpers] who are like you or even better than you, [the prophet repeated this three times.] God will not disgrace a community of which I am the beginning and Jesus the end.’”⁵⁷⁴ Jesus, in his return, finishes what Muhammad started. I discussed the idea of “bookending” earlier and how this venerates ‘Īsā. Now the analogy is applied to the beginning and ending of the Caliphate begun with Muhammad. Jesus finishes what Muhammad started in this analogy, which creates tension within the Islamic narrative regarding Muhammad being the final Prophet. Saritoprak recognizes this tension when he says, “One problem is still unsolved for Muslim theologians. If the Prophet Muhammad is the final messenger of God, which is a theological principle in Islam, and Jesus is also a prominent messenger of God, which all

⁵⁷⁴ Al-Qurṭūbī, *Al-Tadhkira fi Ahwal*, 774; as cited in Saritoprak, *Islam’s Jesus*, 81-82.

Muslims must also believe, then wouldn't the coming of Jesus contradict the finality of Muhammad's prophethood? This question has posed a serious challenge to Muslim theologians."⁵⁷⁵ I discussed earlier that to address this concern, Saritoprak quotes Ibn 'Arabī saying, "He [Ibn 'Arabi] describes Jesus as the 'seal of general sainthood,' whereas Muhammad is the 'seal of the prophets.'"⁵⁷⁶ I also suggested that the creation of a new title for 'Īsā does not alleviate the tension it was intended to address, rather, it brings it into focus.

Saritoprak says, "Jesus' [allegorical] descent to the Umayyad Mosque means that Christianity, through renewal, will become closer to the real teachings of Jesus and will bring the teachings of Islam and Christianity into alliance. It is believed that if this interpretation is the most accurate one, it will pave the way for Muslim-Christian cooperation and world peace, which is indicated as one of the goals that Jesus will fulfill after his descent."⁵⁷⁷ Muslim-Christian cooperation and world peace are possible through the eschatological role of 'Īsā, according to Saritoprak. This closely reflects his previous comments but now the idea of "world peace" is offered as an outcome of *nuzūl* 'Īsā. While this idea is within formative-classical understandings, the idea that *nuzūl* 'Īsā can be

⁵⁷⁵ Saritoprak, *Islam's Jesus*, 105.

⁵⁷⁶ Ibn 'Arabī, *Al-Futuhat al-Makkiya*, 13:136–37; as cited in Saritoprak, *Islam's Jesus*, 127.

⁵⁷⁷ Saritoprak, *Islam's Jesus*, 160. Saritoprak prefaced this quote with, "Muslim theologians who held an allegorical understanding paved the way for later theological commentaries including interpretations of narratives about the eschatological descent of Jesus." Therefore, the quote is in the context of an allegorical descent understanding.

happening now, that world peace can be attained now, creates tension with those understandings.

Saritoprak makes another statement that has significant impact if *nuzūl* ʿĪsā can be happening now. He says, “[*Nuzūl* ʿĪsā] will coincide with a time when chaos and anarchy are spread in the community. He [al-Ashʿarī] is clear that in such a period of anarchy, when bloodshed is highly possible, Muslims are not allowed to participate in chaos and defy authority. Their duty is to support Jesus, the just ruler, who in this case represents authority.”⁵⁷⁸ Akyol referred to the present time as a time of “malaise” in the Muslim world.⁵⁷⁹ Saritoprak offers a word picture for the malaise Akyol refers to. Like Akyol, who says of ʿĪsā, “we can follow him ... in fact, we need to follow him,” Saritoprak says, “their duty is to support Jesus.”⁵⁸⁰ According to Akyol and Saritoprak, ʿĪsā is the ultimate hope for Islam - a prophet for this time, for Muslims, Christians, and Jews, and it is a Muslim’s “duty” and “need” to follow him. Saritoprak paraphrases Ibn ʿArabī as saying, “Jesus’ return at the end of time directly relates to Muslims; Jesus comes to rescue Muslims from oppression.”⁵⁸¹ While Ibn ʿArabī’s statement positions the return of Jesus at “the end of time,” reflecting formative-classical understandings, Saritoprak is using Ibn ʿArabī’s

⁵⁷⁸ Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ashʿarī, *Al-Maqālat al-Islāmiyyīn*, 295; as cited in Saritoprak, *Islam’s Jesus*, 103.

⁵⁷⁹ Akyol, *The Islamic Jesus*, 215.

⁵⁸⁰ Ibid, 210; Saritoprak, *Islam’s Jesus*, 103.

⁵⁸¹ Ibn ʿArabī, *Al-Futuhāt al-Makkiya*, 13:136–37; as cited in Saritoprak, *Islam’s Jesus*, 126.

statement in the context of an allegorical interpretation of *nuzūl* ʿĪsā positioning ʿĪsā as the present hope to “rescue Muslims from oppression.”

Saritoprak continues, “The Prophetic promise of Jesus’ return is a reminder that the Islamic community will never be abandoned by God. In the time of the most difficult calamities when they are almost hopeless, a messenger of God such as Jesus will come to their aid. This hope has played a vital role throughout history.”⁵⁸² Tremendous hope, even rescue, is being offered through an allegorical interpretation of *nuzūl* ʿĪsā.

Appreciation of ʿĪsā through the events of his Second Coming continues as Saritoprak says, “But when Jesus comes again with a new mission to defeat the archenemy of faith, the Antichrist, he will again need help and supporters. In this case the Muslim community will act like Jesus’ early disciples and be the greatest support of Jesus in this eschatological mission to defeat al-Dajjāl, the Antichrist, about whose deceptions and trials the Prophet of Islam forewarned his community.”⁵⁸³ The Dajjāl, in an allegorical interpretation, would refer to the enemies of Islam. Saritoprak reflects Akyol’s call to return to “the exact same kind of reform in Judaism at a time when Jews were exactly like us. Jesus can, in other words, become a source of inspiration for the much-sought transformation in Islam.”⁵⁸⁴ Becoming like Jesus’ “early disciples” is the way the ummah can experience the rescue offered by the Jesus of Islam.

⁵⁸² Saritoprak, *Islam’s Jesus*, 72.

⁵⁸³ Ibid, 105.

⁵⁸⁴ Akyol, *The Islamic Jesus*, 214.

Regarding ʿĪsā as a renewer of Islam, Saritoprak says: “Instead of bringing new laws, he will use Qurʾānic law. For example, after recording many hadīth on the descent of Jesus in his commentary on the Qurʾān, al-Qurṭūbī says the following: ‘Our scholars, may God’s mercy be with them, have said: This is a proof that Jesus descends as a renewer of the religion of the Prophet [Muhammad], peace and blessings be upon him.’”⁵⁸⁵ This statement offers no departure from formative-classical understandings as is. However, putting statements like this in the context of allegorical or metaphorical interpretations of *nuzūl* ʿĪsā brings new understandings that may be in tension with formative-classical understandings. Saritoprak is suggesting that the Muslim community does not have to wait to experience the renewal of Islam, which formative-classical understandings associate with a literal descent of Jesus, but they can experience it now if they submit themselves to be disciples of the Jesus of Islam. This strengthens the idea that the prophethood of ʿĪsā is unique, significant, and the ultimate hope for Islam.

7.2.4 *Nuzūl* ʿĪsā - spiritual event

Saritoprak offers an interpretation of *nuzūl* ʿĪsā as something other than a physical return. He says, “Theologians agree that the divine descent [God’s nightly descent as recorded al-Bukhārī] is not material. Therefore, it can be argued that the descent of Jesus as narrated by the Prophet can be understood as a spiritual descent and not necessarily a

⁵⁸⁵ Al-Qurṭūbī, *Al-Jamiʿli Ahkam al-Qurʾān*, 16:107; as cited in Saritoprak, *Islam’s Jesus*, 80.

physical one. Accordingly, Jesus' descent from the heavens can imply that God will send him out of mercy. Such a descent will strengthen the spiritual lives of people."⁵⁸⁶

Saritoprak's idea, that the return of 'Īsā may be a "spiritual" instead of a "physical" descent, was introduced earlier. I will now differentiate Saritoprak's term, "spiritual" from the terms "physical," "allegorical," or "metaphorical" and offer its importance according to Saritoprak.

If I dreamt a prophet invited me to dine with him, it would be important how I interpreted the dream. It could be a future *physical* event where I may dine with this prophet in a heavenly setting, or it could be a *metaphorical or allegorical* event in which the dream suggests that the prophet will provide for my basic needs in the future without actual contact or interaction with the prophet, or it could be a *spiritual* event which would suggest the prophet is inviting me to participate in some form of spiritual interaction or fellowship. From this example, both a physical and a spiritual event implies an experience that involves greater intimacy than an allegorical or metaphorical event. This reflects Saritoprak's use of the word "spiritual" because he interprets the return of Jesus as an event that will "strengthen the spiritual lives of people" for the benefit of the ummah and the world and offer Muslims the opportunity to experience intimacy with 'Īsā now; because he ['Īsā] can descend as a spirit to have fellowship with the ummah at any

⁵⁸⁶ Saritoprak, *Islam's Jesus*, 35-36. Also see Al-Bukhārī 9:983:586. "Every night when it is the last third of the night, our Lord, the Superior, the Blessed, descends to the nearest heaven and says: Is there anyone to invoke Me that I may respond to his invocation? Is there anyone to ask Me so that I may grant him his request? Is there anyone asking My forgiveness so that I may forgive him?"

time since he is not constrained by a physical body.⁵⁸⁷ Saritoprak's suggestion, that the return of 'Īsā may be a spiritual event, makes possible the visitation of 'Īsā through dreams and visions to anyone at any time.

7.3 Conclusions

In this chapter I present and develop the premise that Muslim interest in 'Īsā's Second Coming (*nuzūl* 'Īsā) has resulted in ideas from the primary sources representing movements from formative-classical understandings. Saritoprak demonstrates enthusiastic expectation of the imminent return of 'Īsā and the peace he will bring to the world. Harpci, Saritoprak and Akyol suggest this peace could be realized now since *nuzūl* 'Īsā could be a metaphorical, allegorical, or spiritual event rather than a physical event. Akyol says the Islamic Jesus gives us a prophet for this time, for Muslims, Jews and Christians living today, to bring about a Caliphate of the heart in each person. These understandings are presented under Two themes: First, 'Īsā's eschatological role which encompasses the actions and accomplishments of 'Īsā in his Second Coming; and second, 'Īsā as the ultimate hope for Islam which is a result of some of the authors' perspectives that *nuzūl* 'Īsā is an allegorical or metaphorical descent, instead of physical, and occurs regularly in the lives of Muslims and those who listen to 'Īsā's words. The first theme

⁵⁸⁷ Zeki Saritoprak, "The Eschatological Descent of Jesus: Muslim Views." *The Fountain*, no. January-March (2000): 18. Saritoprak says, "God descends every night to this world ... so in this sense, the descent of Jesus in his Second Coming can be spiritual, meaning that God will send him from His Mercy to be a mercy to humanity."

involves ʿĪsā's *future* accomplishments, the second his *present* activities. The first theme includes ideas that complement upon formative-classical understandings without tension while the second includes ideas that create tension with those understandings without conflict. The findings in this chapter are significant, to the ummah and the world. If the primary sources are accurate in their understandings of *nuzūl* ʿĪsā, the Jesus of Islam is relevant today to the future of all peoples in the world and has become more than a prophet to the Jewish people. He is the prophet of hope, future and present.

I continue to the seventh and eighth themes which are related to ʿĪsā's role as a zealot and martyr.

Chapter 8 - Zealot and Martyr

Aslan, Ataie, and Akyol provide the ideas for the next two themes. Aslan's Jesus of Islam represents a significant departure from formative-classical understandings and conflicts with those understandings as will be demonstrated. He is the only contributor to Theme 7 - *ʿĪsā is a zealot opposed to social evil*. After discussing Aslan's *Zealot* and demonstrating its deviation from formative-classical understandings, I will allow Ataie and Akyol to provide ideas supporting Theme 8 - *ʿĪsā is a martyr, a "sacrificial lamb" for Israel's sake*. Their ideas either complement formative-classical understandings without conflict, provide understandings that create tension with formative-classical understandings, or conflict with those understandings.

8.1 Theme 7 - *ʿĪsā is a zealot opposed to social evil*

The following ideas expressed by Aslan conflict with formative-classical understandings. I will consider Aslan's *Zealot* to capture the Jesus of Islam he has come to admire and compare Aslan's understandings to formative-classical understandings. I will highlight his departures from formative-classical understandings to the point of conflict. Aslan's Jesus was a zealot, an ordinary man, who attempted to gather an army of disciples with the goal of establishing the Kingdom of God on earth to address the social evils of his day. He defied the authority of the Temple priesthood in Jerusalem,

challenged the Roman occupation, and lost. He was a historical person, with no special claim to divinity or mystical nature. To appreciate Aslan's Jesus, one must see him as Aslan does regarding his virgin birth, miracles, crucifixion, and as a "reclaimed Jesus."⁵⁸⁸ Through these lenses I will construct the zealot that Aslan admires and capture Aslan's drift from formative-classical understandings.

8.1.1 Conflict - virgin birth

Aslan doubts the virgin birth of Jesus. He says, "The virgin birth is never even hinted at by anyone else in the New Testament: not by the evangelist John, who presents Jesus as an otherworldly spirit without earthly origins, nor by Paul, who thinks of Jesus as literally God incarnate."⁵⁸⁹ Aslan bases his argument against the virgin birth of Jesus on the Isaiah passage referenced in Matthew's Gospel saying, "The argument in Matthew that Jesus' virgin birth was prophesied in Isaiah holds no water at all, since scholars are nearly unanimous in translating the passage in Isaiah 7:14 not as 'behold a virgin shall conceive' but 'behold, a young maiden (*alma*) will conceive.' There is no debate here: *alma* is Hebrew for a young woman. Period."⁵⁹⁰ But there is debate over the translation of the word "alma" in Isaiah 7:14. The *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*

⁵⁸⁸ Aslan, *Zealot*, xxx. Aslan says, "This book is an attempt to reclaim, as much as possible, the Jesus of history, the Jesus before Christianity."

⁵⁸⁹ *Ibid*, 36.

⁵⁹⁰ *Ibid*, 230.

translates “*Im*” (*almah*) as a young woman, one of whose characteristics is virginity.⁵⁹¹ David Gray says, “There has been so much debate about the meaning of *alma* in Isa 7:14 that we begin to miss what is almost obvious – the data in the Hebrew Bible shows us that the term refers to a young woman who is not yet married. In the culture of the day, it would have been shocking if she had not been a virgin, but that is not the focus of the passage, at least in its Old Testament use.”⁵⁹² To support his position Aslan offers Greek philosopher Celsus’ (d. 177 CE) story recorded in his second-century tract *True Discourse*, which has been lost to history, about a Roman soldier Panthera (d. 40 CE) who was Jesus’ father.⁵⁹³ Aslan acknowledges that Origen of Alexandria (d. 253 CE) challenged this story in his polemical response *Against Celsus*, written sometime in the middle of the third century C.E., but he does not offer Origen’s argument against its reliability.⁵⁹⁴ Aslan cites Jane Schaberg’s claim that Mary was likely raped, though Aslan is not sure how she arrives at this conclusion.⁵⁹⁵ It is not my objective to resolve the question of Mary’s

⁵⁹¹ Allan A. MacRae, “*Im*” in *The Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, ed. R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), 2:672.

⁵⁹² David Gray, “The Sense of *Alma* in Isaiah 7:14”, 5. Accessed September 18, 2023. https://www.academia.edu/9218095/THE_SENSE_OF_ALMA_IN_ISAIAH_7_14.

⁵⁹³ Aslan, *Zealot*, 36.

⁵⁹⁴ John Patrick, *The Apology of Origen in Reply to Celsus: A Chapter in the History of Apologetics* (Edinburgh & London: William Blackwood and Sons, 1892), 23, 268. Patrick presents Origen’s argument who says the charge of Jesus’ birth being the result of a “secret association” [Mary and Panthera] is absurd because, “Christians alone meet with exceptional treatment, and are denied the liberty of serving God according to their convictions ... they must obey the law of truth” (p. 268). Origen argues that Christians are bound by truth before God and the doctrine of virgin birth, crucifixion, and resurrection have been presented as truth since their occurrence. Also see Aslan, *Zealot*, 230.

⁵⁹⁵ Jane Schaberg, *The Illegitimacy of Jesus: A Feminist Theological Interpretation of the Infancy Narratives*, Expanded twentieth anniversary edition, Classics Reprints (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2006), 169-

virginity. What is relevant is that Aslan's position on Mary's virginity conflicts with formative-classical understandings.⁵⁹⁶

8.1.2 Conflict - miracles

Another departure from formative-classical understandings of 'Īsā by Aslan is his understanding of Jesus' miracles. In Chapter 1, I established that the Qur'an assigns to 'Īsā many miracles and considers them to be acts from Allah performed through the person of 'Īsā. As discussed in earlier chapters, these miracles were supernatural and granted by Allah so 'Īsā could be recognized as a prophet in the order of Moses and others who came before him. Aslan, however, categorizes the miraculous deeds of 'Īsā as more magic than supernatural and does not believe there is any evidence to support a truly supernatural deed by 'Īsā.⁵⁹⁷ Aslan admits that 'Īsā *appeared* to perform miracles, but they were no more extraordinary than those of his contemporaries. Aslan offers Apollonius of Tyana as an example saying, "Described as a 'holy man' who taught the concept of a 'Supreme God,' Apollonius performed miraculous deeds everywhere he

170. Schaberg examines several possibilities of a virginal conception of Jesus in this work. She says that one option overlooked by most scholars is rape.

⁵⁹⁶ Also see J.M.S. Baljon, *Modern Muslim Koran Interpretation* (1880-1960) (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1968), 70, who notes that there are Muslims in the modern period who have expressed doubt over the virgin birth of Jesus. Ghulam Ahmed Parwez (d. 1886) held that Mary received the same answer from God regarding her question of how this [pregnancy] could be since no man had touched her, "Even so, God creates what He will" (Qur'ān 3:42/47), as was given in connection with the birth of St. John (Qur'ān 3:35/40). And Parwez says, "And in due course Mary shall become pregnant. The Koran does not deem it necessary to give a detailed description of it. Everybody knows how pregnancy comes about."

⁵⁹⁷ Aslan, *Zealot*, 104.

went. He healed the lame, the blind, the paralytic. He even raised a girl from the dead.”⁵⁹⁸ Aslan argues that ʿĪsā’s miracles “did not deviate greatly from the standard expectation of exorcists and miracle workers in first-century Palestine;” that is, they were more magic than supernatural.⁵⁹⁹ Aslan cites the *Gospel of Thomas*, which portrays a Jesus who performs no miracles, as influential on his understandings.⁶⁰⁰ This is contradictory to the Qur’an which says, “But when he showed them the miracles, they said, ‘This is obvious sorcery.’ And who is a greater wrongdoer than he who attributes falsehoods to God, when he is being invited to Islam?”⁶⁰¹ The Qur’an says those who reject ʿĪsā’s miracles are guilty of “wrongdoing.”

8.1.3 Conflict - crucifixion of a zealous, angry Jesus

A paradox in Aslan’s text is that he appreciates a zealous, angry Jesus, and yet considers him someone he could call “friend.”⁶⁰² He finds Jesus’ anger justified; citing the incident where Jesus overturned the tables in the temple. He sees the scene on Golgotha as significant, saying, “Three rebels on a hill covered in crosses, each cross bearing the

⁵⁹⁸ Aslan, *Zealot*, 106; Apollonius of Tyana was a wandering Greek philosopher (3 BC – 97 AD) and a contemporary of Jesus whose life offered some parallels to Jesus of Nazareth including the ability to perform miracle-like deeds.

⁵⁹⁹ Aslan, *Zealot*, 107.

⁶⁰⁰ Jean-Yves Leloup and Joseph Rowe, eds. *The Gospel of Thomas: The Gnostic Wisdom of Jesus* (Rochester: Inner Traditions, 2005); Bock and Wallace, *Dethroning Jesus*, 129, provides support for Aslan’s claim that the text supports no miracles of Jesus. Aslan comments in Aslan, *Zealot*, 200.

⁶⁰¹ Qur’an 61:6-7.

⁶⁰² Aslan, *Zealot*, xvii.

racked and bloodied body of a man who dared defy the will of Rome. That image alone should cast doubt upon the Gospels' portrayal of Jesus as a man of unconditional peace almost wholly insulated from the political upheavals of his time."⁶⁰³ This puts Aslan in conflict with the Qur'an which denies 'Īsā's death on a cross according to almost all Muslim understandings; an event Aslan accepts as true.⁶⁰⁴ He affirms this when he says, "In the end, there are only two hard historical facts about Jesus of Nazareth upon which we can confidently rely: the first is that Jesus was a Jew who led a popular Jewish movement in Palestine at the beginning of the first century C.E.; the second is that Rome crucified him for doing so."⁶⁰⁵

Aslan uses the imagery of Jesus on the cross above to suggest he could not have been "a man of unconditional peace." Further he says, "There is no evidence that Jesus himself openly advocated violent actions, but he was certainly no pacifist."⁶⁰⁶ He quotes Matthew 10:34 and Luke 12:51, "Do not think that I have come to bring peace on earth. I have not come to bring peace, but the sword."⁶⁰⁷ Aslan does not contemplate a metaphorical instead of literal interpretation of this passage. While a sword is an

⁶⁰³ Ibid.

⁶⁰⁴ There is a minority of Muslim scholars who affirm the crucifixion but not its theological significance. In addition, there is debate about whether the Qur'an denies the crucifixion, but most Muslims interpret the Qur'an to deny the event (Qur'an 4:157).

⁶⁰⁵ Aslan, *Zealot*, xxviii.

⁶⁰⁶ Ibid, 120.

⁶⁰⁷ Ibid. Aslan translates all Greek quotations from the New Testament himself, occasionally drawing from the New Revised Standard Version. This quotation is the NRSV text except "a sword" is translated by Aslan as "the sword."

implement of war, many scholars agree that Jesus was using this imagery in a figurative sense as saying that his teachings would bring spiritual and relational conflict between his followers and the world, even one's own family.⁶⁰⁸

Aslan's warlike Jesus is a considerable departure from formative-classical understandings regarding the nature of 'Īsā which declares his followers to be people of compassion and mercy because he possessed these qualities.⁶⁰⁹ Horsley suggests there may be political motivation for Aslan creating an angry, zealous Jesus who is justified in using force to bring Allah's kingdom to earth saying, "Might Aslan, who has written previously about fundamentalism, terrorism, and jihadis in the contemporary Middle East, be influenced by current religious-political conflicts? and/or might he be addressing them?"⁶¹⁰ It is possible that after the attacks on America by Muslims on September 11, 2001, Aslan was experiencing religious persecution and found Jesus the zealot a role model, i.e., persecuted for his religious beliefs, passionate, yet unappreciated. Aslan, in an interview in 2013 before *Zealot* was published, says, "The anti-Muslim fringe, the rabid Islamophobes, have been attacking me for a decade and calling me vile and racist names."⁶¹¹ Aslan's depiction of Jesus as "no pacifist" conflicts with formative-classical understandings.

⁶⁰⁸ Richard T. France, *Matthew: An Introduction and Commentary*, Repr. *The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries* 1. (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 2008), 192.

⁶⁰⁹ The followers of Jesus will be people of compassion and mercy (Qur'an 57:27).

⁶¹⁰ Horsley, "Reza Aslan, *Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth*," 203.

⁶¹¹ Sally Quinn, "Reza Aslan, Researching While Muslim." *Washington Post*, July 1, 2023, 3.

8.1.4 Aslan's Jesus is a "reclaimed" Jesus

Aslan was quoted earlier as looking for "a best friend, someone with whom I could have a deep and personal relationship." Aslan's Jesus was a zealous human being, with a passion for the poor, disdain for the wealthy, a love for the Mosaic law, and new teachings like the Beatitudes to expand the existing law. His Jesus was not opposed to using force to accomplish his objectives and dying for what he believed to be just. He was not detached, as Aslan perceives the Jesus of the Gospels was, from earthly kingdoms and issues. Aslan reconstructs, or as he prefers "reclaims," a Jesus that is a considerable departure from ʿĪsā of formative-classical Islam and represents a new and most interesting persona by a contemporary American Muslim author.⁶¹² Jesus the zealot, his historical Jesus, is more human to Aslan. He admires Jesus the zealot for his commitment to his cause, disruption of the current world order, and his unwavering support for the less fortunate. Aslan's Jesus not only maintained his belief in one true God and the laws given to mankind through previous prophets, but also believed there were laws that could be added for the betterment of mankind, referring to the Beatitudes. Jesus is a credible persona, according to Aslan, in that he did no real miracles, failed at his immediate mission, got angry and tried to affect change with his own strength. This helps the reader resolve the paradox of how Aslan could consider a zealous, angry Jesus,

⁶¹² Aslan, *Zealot*, xxx. Aslan says, "This book is an attempt to reclaim, as much as possible, the Jesus of history, the Jesus before Christianity."

“friend.” Aslan’s Jesus is a person he thought he embraced when he became a Christian. When he discovered the Jesus of the Gospels was much more than a human friend [the incarnation of a member of a divine triunity] and believed this Jesus to be fabricated by Pauline Christians, he returned to Islam and the pursuit of his historical Jesus which he believes to be Jesus the zealot and friend.

8.2 Theme 8 - ‘Īsā is a martyr, a “sacrificial lamb” for Israel’s sake

Theme 8, *‘Īsā is a martyr, a “sacrificial lamb” for Israel’s sake*, is in tension with formative-classical understandings which deny Jesus’ death [martyrdom] on the cross and affirm his ascension to Allah where the world awaits his return. Therefore, to the degree the ideas from the primary sources below affirm ‘Īsā’s death, they offer understandings that either create tension or conflict with formative-classical understandings. This theme will discuss ‘Īsā’s suffering and death on a cross, his post-mortem appearances, and the idea that through his death he bore Israel’s transgressions.

It is necessary to revisit the formative-classical understanding developed in Chapter 1.1 to make the correct classification assignment during this analysis. First, I discussed that formative-classical understandings deny the crucifixion death of ‘Īsā and affirm that he was given the honor of being taken up to heaven with God. Second, they affirm that Jesus will ultimately die a natural death and experience a resurrection like the other prophets and saints of Islam; and lastly, they deny that “God’s word” could be killed or destroyed.

Ataie says, “There may be some wiggle room in the Qur’ān’s wording with respect to the ‘end’ of Jesus’ earthly life, as some scholars such as Ayoub, Reynolds, and Lawson contend that the Qur’ān may not negate Jesus’ crucifixion, death, and possible resurrection.”⁶¹³ There is ambiguity, or as Ataie says, “wiggle room in the Qur’ān’s wording,” because it allows the possibility of the physical death of the body of Jesus on the cross, but the spirit or soul of Jesus could be unharmed and ascend to Allah.

Unlike Aslan, who plainly affirms the death of Jesus on the cross as any common criminal would have experienced, Ataie and Akyol offer understandings below that operate within the “wiggle room” described by Ataie on this topic and create tension with formative-classical understandings. Ataie will also offer an understanding at the end of this section that conflicts with formative-classical understandings.

8.2.1 ʿĪsā suffered and died on the cross

Ataie believes ʿĪsā was opposed to the social evils of his day and was ultimately sacrificed for Israel’s sake. He says, “Thus just as God saved Isaac, the progenitor of the

⁶¹³ Gabriel Said Reynolds, “The Muslim Jesus: Dead or Alive?” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London* 72, no. 2 (2009): 237; Reynolds says, “I contend that the Quran rather accepts that Jesus died, and indeed alludes to his role as a witness against his murderers in the apocalypse.” Mahmoud M. Ayoub “Towards an Islamic Christology, II: The Death of Jesus, Reality or Delusion.” *The Muslim World* 70, no. 2 (1980): 116-117; Ayoub says the Qur’an’s denial of the death of Jesus refers to the “Word of God” and not the human being. Lawson, *The Crucifixion and the Qur’an: A Study in the History of Muslim Thought*, 2-3; Lawson says, “But, as will be seen in the following pages, any number of readers - Muslim or not - could read the same verse [Q; 4:157] without coming to that conclusion [that they did not crucify him].” Ataie is correct that these sources affirm the possibility of a crucified Jesus. “Possible resurrection” was discussed in the context of Jesus’ ascension into heaven after his death (See Reynolds, 240). Also see Ataie, *Authenticating the Johannine Injil*, 1, 16.

Israelites and son of Abraham, by providing a sheep for the slaughter, He likewise saved Israel, His own 'firstborn,' from national catastrophe by sacrificing His 'unique Son' Jesus, the Messiah."⁶¹⁴ Ataie's views on 'Īsā being sacrificed to "save Israel from national catastrophe" will be discussed later. Ataie's understanding of the nature of the crucifixion with respect to the body and spirit of 'Īsā is the immediate focus.

With the statement above, Ataie appears to be affirming the crucifixion and death of 'Īsā on the cross, but he clarifies his statement. He says, "Affirming the Crucifixion of Jesus Christ will no doubt provoke calls of anathema against me by many of my fellow Muslims. In my view, the Jews (Jewish authorities) managed to get Jesus on a cross, but he did not expire due to crucifixion - God saved him by seizing his soul - exactly as He said He would: 'Behold! God said to Jesus, 'I will seize your soul and raise you up unto myself' (Qur'ān 3:55.1)."⁶¹⁵ Ataie's interpretation of the crucifixion of 'Īsā is that 'Īsā's body appeared to die on the cross but his death was the result of his soul being taken from him by God, not crucifixion. Ataie says, "Jesus has his life seized by God who raises his repute as well as his soul and is then vindicated by his resurrection."⁶¹⁶

⁶¹⁴ Ataie, *Authenticating the Johannine Injil*, 170.

⁶¹⁵ Ibid, 174. Ataie recognizes that there have been translational issues with the phrase "I will seize your soul." He cites al-Suyūtī to translate "the seizer of you." Pickthall, Yusuf 'Ali, and Shakir translate respectively as, "I am gathering thee," "I will take thee," and "I will terminate the period of your stay on earth." Ataie's conclusion is, "It seems as if these translators are avoiding the obvious; God caused Jesus to die by taking his soul thus giving the *appearance* that Jesus died from injuries inflicted upon him at the behest of the Jewish temple authorities. Ayoub appears to support Ataie's position as he translates this passage as saying, "cause to die;" in "Towards an Islamic Christology, II: The Death of Jesus, Reality or Delusion." *The Muslim World* 70, no. 2 (1980): 106-7.

⁶¹⁶ Ibid, 304.

This is an interesting nuance of the events of the crucifixion by Ataie to remain within Qur'anic understandings; although by his admission, it creates tension with those understandings provoking calls of "anathema ... by fellow Muslims." Formative-classical understandings assert Jesus' ascension to be of both body and spirit. Muhammad affirms this in his encounter with 'Īsā in his *Mi'rāj* as discussed earlier. Ataie attempts to resolve this tension saying, "It was God who seized the soul of His Messiah from the cross, not allowing him to expire due to injuries inflicted upon him by the Jewish authorities. Three days later, God returned the Messiah's soul to his body to vindicate him in the eyes of his enemies."⁶¹⁷ Ataie reunites 'Īsā with his body through a bodily resurrection three days after his crucifixion. While this nuanced understanding attempts to reconcile both formative-classical and 'Johannine *Injīl*' understandings of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, it leaves Ataie's account in tension with formative-classical understandings.⁶¹⁸ Ataie's Jesus "expires on the cross," and will die a second death to fulfill his eschatological role; only one death is spoken of in the Qur'an.⁶¹⁹

⁶¹⁷ Ibid, 317.

⁶¹⁸ Marshall, "The Resurrection of Jesus and the Qur'an," 171. Marshall says, "Nevertheless, for our present purposes we must note that on the accepted Muslim reading of this passage [Qur'an 4:157] the Jesus whom God by raising him up had never died, and it is suggested that someone else died in his place. God's raising up of Jesus would then be an ascension without a prior death or resurrection, reminiscent of the exaltation of Elijah (2 Kgs. 2:1-12)."

⁶¹⁹ Qur'an 19:33; "Peace is upon me the day I was born, and the day I die, and the Day I get resurrected alive." One death and one resurrection are spoken of in this surah. Ataie's understanding requires two deaths and two resurrections; Jesus dies on the cross, is resurrected to make appearances before his ascension to Allah, returns to perform his eschatological role which results in his second death and resurrection. Also see Reynolds, "The Muslim Jesus: Dead or Alive?", 238; Reynolds makes the association between Christian Docetism, and Muslim understandings as do many others.

Ataie's nuanced understanding, which I label 'Qur'anic Docetism,' has similarities to the Christian heresy of Docetism. Docetism taught that Jesus was a divine being that took on human appearance but not flesh.⁶²⁰ Akyol recognizes that understandings like Ataie's have precedent in the Christian tradition. He says, "There is one more point to consider regarding the Qur'ān's take on the cross: [There are] possible precedents in the Christian tradition—the early Christian 'heresy' called Docetism—the doctrine that Christ did not really suffer on the cross, but it only seemed to be that way."⁶²¹ Akyol's description of the Christian heresy Docetism and Ataie's understanding which I have labeled 'Qur'anic Docetism' are similar but distinctly different. I recall Ataie's understanding above, "In my view, the Jews (Jewish authorities) managed to get Jesus on a cross, but he did not expire due to crucifixion - God saved him by seizing his soul."⁶²² In Ataie's 'Qur'anic Docetism,' Jesus appears to suffer and die but his *soul* has departed leaving his body to suffer and die. In the Christian heresy of Docetism, Jesus appears to suffer and die but his *divinity* has already departed leaving an apparition of a man on the cross. Ataie's understanding is in tension with formative-classical understandings, which deny Jesus' death by crucifixion, and introduces a resurrection understanding that needs examining.

⁶²⁰ John Azumah, "Incarnation and Translation in Islam and Christianity," 62. In *Jesus and the Incarnation*, edited by David Singh (Oxford: Regnum Books International, 2011).

⁶²¹ Akyol, *The Islamic Jesus*, 155.

⁶²² Ataie, *Authenticating the Johannine Injil*, 174.

8.2.2 'Īsā made post-mortem appearances

With the understanding that Jesus' body expired during crucifixion, but his soul escaped, Ataie affirms a resurrection of Christ that involves receiving a body for post-mortem appearances. He says, "Thus God kept His promise to the Messiah – 'the Lord saves his Messiah' (Psalm 20:6) - by rescuing him from being killed by his enemies in order to both fulfill the Scriptures and to render Jesus' resurrection as a proof of his Christhood – 'a great sign unto humanity' (Q 19:21.5)."⁶²³ Ataie affirms a "resurrection" of Christ and post-mortem appearances saying, "As for his first-coming, Jesus' sacrifice of his life and subsequent post-mortem appearances opened up the ways and means for the Gospel to be heard all throughout the Mediterranean. The Jews were given forty years to accept Jesus as 'lord and savior,' after which time their cup of iniquity became full, culminating in the destruction of the second Temple, the 'dress-rehearsal' of the Day of Judgment for the Jewish nation."⁶²⁴ Ataie's understanding represents change from formative-classical understandings which suggest 'Īsā was taken up to Allah to await *nuzūl* 'Īsā without further or interim appearances. Ataie affirms that the ascension of Jesus occurred after receiving a resurrected body. He says, "Thus when the believers in Christ witnessed his ascension, according to Acts 1, the mother of Jesus is described as being

⁶²³ Ibid, 176.

⁶²⁴ Ibid, 174.

‘with his brothers’ [Acts 1:14.9]).”⁶²⁵ For Ataie, Jesus makes resurrection “appearances” before his ascension. Those who witnessed Jesus’ ascension included his disciples among whom were his mother and brothers. They had gathered to be with him before his ascension, therefore they saw him in a resurrected body sometime after the cross and before the ascension. These understandings are in tension with formative-classical understandings which suggest Jesus’ bodily ascension occurred before the crucifixion.

8.2.3 Conflict - bore Israel’s transgressions

Ataie offers an idea that conflicts with formative-classical understandings. In this theme, *ʿĪsā is a martyr, a “sacrificial lamb” for Israel’s sake*, there are two premises: That ʿĪsā is a “martyr,” which I have been discussing, and that ʿĪsā is a “sacrificial lamb” for Israel’s sake. Ataie says, “Jesus is the Suffering Servant, and there is redemptive value to his suffering. The transgressions of the children of Israel were laid upon him and he went willingly and selflessly to his death in order to save the nation of Israel from immediate annihilation by the Romans and to give the Jews living in Diaspora an opportunity to hear and believe in the Gospel - He was ‘chastised’ in order for Israel to have peace.”⁶²⁶ The noteworthy phrase is “the transgressions of the children of Israel were laid upon him ... he was ‘chastised’ in order for Israel to have peace.” I have discussed previously the idea

⁶²⁵ Ibid, 256.

⁶²⁶ Ibid, 307.

of intercession in Islam; that prophets, saints, and perhaps others might be given the opportunity to intercede for the sins of the ummah or loved ones before Allah on the Day of Judgement. But the imagery portrayed in Ataie's statement advocates a unique intervention in Islam, "a sacrificial lamb ... for Israel's [sake]." If there was "a sacrificial lamb ... for Islam's sake," Shi'a Muslims would propose Imām Husayn who was martyred in Karbala, Iraq, in 680 CE, a day known in Islamic history as Ashura.⁶²⁷ Al-Jibouri, a Shi'a, says of this day, "Narrators of this incident record saying that there was hardly any place in al-Hussain's [Husayn's] body that escaped a sword stroke or an arrow, and the same can be said about his horse al-Sahab."⁶²⁸ Al-Jibouri concludes his narration about the importance of Husayn with these words, "Imām [Husayn], the chief of martyrs, is quoted as saying, 'The ninth of my descendants is the Imām who will rise with the truth. Allāh will grant life to earth through him after its death. The true faith will supersede all religions through him.'"⁶²⁹ From al-Jibouri's perspective Imām Husayn, the "chief of martyrs," will have nine descendants (Imams) that will culminate with the final Imam, the Mahdī. Al-Jibouri introduces us to the "chief of martyrs" in Shi'a Islam who will ultimately be succeeded or assisted by 'Īsā. Does the martyrdom of the chief martyr of Shi'a Islam, Husayn, have the same significance as the martyrdom of 'Īsā, whom Ataie describes as one who was a "sacrificial lamb for ... Israel's sake"?

⁶²⁷ Al-Jibouri, *Kerbala and Beyond*, 83.

⁶²⁸ *Ibid*, 88.

⁶²⁹ *Ibid*, 375.

In Ataie's statement, through his martyrdom, 'Isā takes on the sins ["transgressions"] of Israel. Islamic Scripture suggests one person may not take on the sins of another.⁶³⁰ What does Ataie mean by "the transgressions of Israel were laid upon him" and is there some form of redemption implied? Ayoub can help distinguish the Islamic concept of redemption from Ataie's implication. Ayoub suggests there was a redemptive component to Husayn's martyrdom saying, "Like other redeeming martyrs before him, Husayn played the role of the 'prince of peace', healing and redeeming human existence, and the role of the terrible judge who metes out the awful punishment of strict justice with no mercy."⁶³¹ But what did Ayoub mean by "redeeming martyr"? Ayoub distinguishes the "redemption" he is discussing, relative to the martyrdom of Husayn, from the redemption most associated with the word. He says, "The meaning of redemption in this instance must be distinguished from redemption as a theological concept, and especially from its technical use in Christian theology, fulfillment through suffering is what this study will call redemption."⁶³² Ayoub's concept of redemption is about "suffering." He says, "The family of the Prophet Muhammad occupies a central place in Shi'i piety. Their suffering and sorrows are in turn intensely concentrated in the

⁶³⁰ Qur'an 6:164, 17:15, 29:7, 35:18, 39:7, and 53:38 suggests no soul can bear the load of another, each must be responsible for its own account. Also see Marshall, *Learning from How Muslims See Christianity*, 7. Marshall says Muslims believe that nobody can atone for someone else's sins.

⁶³¹ Mahmoud Ayoub, *Redemptive Suffering in Islām: A Study of the Devotional Aspects of 'Āshūrā' in Twelver Shī'ism*, (The Hague: Mouton, 1978), 232.

⁶³² *Ibid*, 23.

sufferings of one man, 'the wronged martyr', Imam Husayn, son of Ali ibn Abi Talib."⁶³³

Ayoub is cautious not to contradict Qur'anic teachings on bearing the sins of another, instead, he suggests that one can bear the sufferings of another, which is what he calls "redemption." Comparing Ayoub's concept of redemption in Islam with Ataie's statement above, there is an important difference. Ataie does not say "the sufferings of the children of Israel were laid upon him," which would be consistent with Ayoub's understanding of redemption. He says, "the transgressions of the children of Israel were laid upon him." Transgressions and suffering are distinctly different; transgressions can cause suffering, but suffering may not be the result of transgressions. Ataie's statement conflicts with Islamic Scripture that suggests one person may not take on the sins [transgressions] of another.

Ataie's exegesis makes conflict inevitable. In exegeting John 10, Ataie refers to Isaiah 53 which says:

But He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; the chastening for our well-being fell upon Him, and by His scourging we are healed. All of us like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; but the LORD has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on Him.⁶³⁴

The language in the text is self-descriptive. The Johannine *Injil* and Isaiah 53 present a Jesus who takes on the sins ["transgressions"] of Israel. According to Ayoub, redemption in Islam is suffering endured on behalf of another, but the redemption described by the

⁶³³ Ibid, 27.

⁶³⁴ Isaiah 53:5-6 (NASB).

Johannine *Injīl* and Ataie is through transgressions born by one for another. The first understanding does not conflict with formative-classical understandings, the second does.

8.3 Conclusions

Aslan presents a Jesus of Islam that is in stark contrast to understandings presented by the other primary sources and formative-classical understandings. His historical Jesus lies outside normative Muslim parameters, but as discussed earlier, his work was a catalyst for some of the works that followed by the source authors. Aslan's understandings of Jesus represent drift in a different direction from formative-classical understandings; whereas the other authors move towards greater appreciation of 'Īsā, Aslan's Jesus "tramped and mostly traipsed through the Holy Land—along with countless other prophets, preachers, and messiahs."⁶³⁵ Aslan's Jesus is a diminished persona from the Jesus of Islam, comparable with historical Jesus understandings, and in conflict with formative-classical understandings as noted above.

I introduced Theme 8, *'Īsā is a martyr, a "sacrificial lamb" for Israel's sake*, saying it is in tension with formative-classical understandings and presented three supporting points: First, formative-classical understandings deny the crucifixion death of 'Īsā and affirm that he was given the honor of being taken up to heaven with God; second, they

⁶³⁵ Horsley, "Reza Aslan, *Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth*," 196.

affirm that Jesus will ultimately die a natural death and experience a resurrection like the other prophets and saints of Islam; and lastly, they deny that “God’s word” could be killed or destroyed, it is “eternally victorious.”

As stated in Chapter 1, there is ambiguity, or as Ataie says, “wobble room” in these understandings because they allow the possibility of the physical death of the body of Jesus on the cross, but the spirit or soul of Jesus could be unharmed and ascend to Allah. Unlike Aslan, who plainly affirms the death of Jesus on the cross as any common criminal would have experienced, Ataie and Akyol offer understandings that operate within the “wobble room” described by Ataie and create tension with formative-classical understandings. Ataie also offers an understanding that conflicts with formative-classical understandings; that “Jesus is the Suffering Servant, and ... the transgressions of the children of Israel were laid upon him.”⁶³⁶ The use of the word “transgressions” [sins] implies an understanding of redemption that is different from Islamic understandings; Ayoub suggests that one can bear the sufferings for another; which he calls [Islamic] redemption. Ataie implies that one can bear the sins [transgressions] of another.

This chapter has introduced understandings that create tension or conflict with formative-classical understandings. In the next chapter I will discuss the personal appreciations of ‘Īsā demonstrated by all the primary sources, Sunnī, Shi’a, Sufi, and Liberal.

⁶³⁶ Ataie, *Authenticating the Johannine Injil*, 307.

Chapter 9 - Object of Personal Appreciation

In the previous chapters, I examined movements in understandings of the person or role of ʿĪsā as articulated by the primary source authors. I compared the authors' ideas to formative-classical understandings to identify and quantify variations from those understandings (classifications). This chapter introduces ʿĪsā as the object of personal appreciation. I define "personal appreciation" to be respect and/or reverence for the person of ʿĪsā that rises above and beyond formative-classical understandings to the point of tension. It is "personal" because it is an understanding not shared by many Muslims, being in tension with formative-classical understandings, and it is "appreciation" because it demonstrates respect or reverence for ʿĪsā. By this definition, all ideas that create tension or conflict with formative-classical understandings are candidates for personal appreciation, but not all are personal appreciation because some may not demonstrate respect or admiration for ʿĪsā. For example, Aslan does not believe ʿĪsā performed miracles. According to this definition, an author's intent is not relevant. If an idea esteems ʿĪsā and creates tension with formative-classical understandings, it is personal appreciation.

An example of personal appreciation is Saritoprak's use of the word "zenith," which was highlighted earlier, to describe the attributes of ʿĪsā's prophetic role

accomplished through his second return. I discussed the tension this word creates with other prophets of Islam and their accomplishments. Another example is Ataie's use of the phrase "as much as possible for a human being" to describe Christ's eminence of God as a human on earth. Ataie also uses al-Ghazālī's analogy to describe the wisdom and person of Jesus, which can be interpreted to move Jesus from the category of prophets to the category of the eternal word of God, like the Qur'an. I discussed the tension this might create within the Islamic narrative regarding the significance of the prophets. These are examples of personal appreciation of 'Īsā by the primary sources because they create tension with formative-classical understandings and show respect and/or reverence for 'Īsā.

The primary sources chose to write on the Jesus of Islam. This fact demonstrates interest in his person, but that interest could be favorable or unfavorable. This chapter highlights statements by the authors that demonstrate a personal respect, or appreciation, for 'Īsā. It will be demonstrated that all express personal appreciation of 'Īsā. In the previous chapters, I considered the ideas of the authors as they contributed to a particular theme. The theme was the focus and authors were brought into and out of the discussion as they were able to contribute. This chapter will reverse the pattern, i.e., authors will be the focus and themes will be discussed as they potentially contribute to the personal appreciation of 'Īsā by the authors.

I will examine the primary sources sequentially; Aslan, al-Jibouri, Akyol, Saritoprak, Ataie, and Harpci. The discussion sequence is based on an author's potential for personal

appreciation, least to greatest, with one exception, Harpci. Three of these authors seem unlikely to personally venerate ʿĪsā. Aslan views the Jesus of Islam much like the historical Jesus, which denies him many of the supernatural acts affirmed by Islamic Scripture. Harpci and al-Jibouri remain close to formative-classical understandings reducing the opportunity for personal appreciation of ʿĪsā by my definition. Akyol, Saritoprak, and Ataie offer the greatest likelihood of personal appreciation; Akyol and Saritoprak’s excitement for *nuzūl* ʿĪsā and Ataie’s selection of the Johannine Gospel for his thesis are the basis for this conclusion. Although Harpci is one of the “unlikely” sources, he offers several examples of personal appreciation which is the reason for placing him at the conclusion to this chapter. The examples below demonstrate changes in understandings from formative-classical understandings and create tension with those understandings.

9.1 Theme 9 - ʿĪsā is the object of personal appreciation

9.1.1 Aslan

Because Aslan views the Jesus of Islam much like the historical Jesus, which denies him many of the supernatural acts affirmed by Islamic Scripture, I might consider him an unlikely candidate to demonstrate personal appreciation of ʿĪsā; he denies his virgin birth

and miracles while affirming his crucifixion and death. But he admires the Jesus of Nazareth (ʿĪsā) because in his view he was part of the Zealot movement in his day.⁶³⁷

In his depiction of Jesus as a zealot, Aslan is inspired by one of Jesus' actions, overturning the tables in the temple. He says, "What is significant about this episode—what is impossible to ignore—is how blatant and inescapably zealous Jesus' actions at the Temple appear."⁶³⁸ He continues, "But look closely at Jesus' words and actions at the Temple in Jerusalem—the episode that undoubtedly precipitated his arrest and execution—and this one fact becomes difficult to deny: Jesus was crucified by Rome because his messianic aspirations threatened the occupation of Palestine, and his zealotry endangered the Temple authorities. That singular fact should color everything we read in the Gospels about the Messiah known as Jesus of Nazareth."⁶³⁹ This action of Jesus captures Aslan's attention. His language regarding Jesus changes as does his tone. He says, "God's sovereignty could not be established except through force ... as God's agent on earth—the one who wielded God's finger—Jesus himself was ushering in the Kingdom of God and establishing God's dominion through his miraculous actions. He was, in effect, the Kingdom of God personified. Who else should sit on God's throne?"⁶⁴⁰ This is admiration expressed by Aslan that can be felt in the tenor and weight of his words.

⁶³⁷ Aslan, *Zealot*, 216.

⁶³⁸ Ibid, 75. I discussed the influence of Brandon on Aslan resulting in these understandings. Also see S. G. F. Brandon, *Jesus and the Zealots* (New York: Scribner, 1967), 9.

⁶³⁹ Ibid, 79.

⁶⁴⁰ Ibid, 122; 126.

Aslan reveals what he admires most in the Jesus of Nazareth, “The sole weapon he had with which to build the Kingdom of God was the one used by all the messiahs who came before or after him, the same weapon used by the rebels and bandits who would eventually push the Roman empire out of the city of God: zeal.”⁶⁴¹ While denying the Jesus of Nazareth the attributes most Muslim understandings bestow upon him, Aslan constructs, or reconstructs (reclaims as he might prefer), Jesus the zealot. He says, “The memory of the revolutionary zealot who walked across Galilee gathering an army of disciples with the goal of establishing the Kingdom of God on earth, the magnetic preacher who defied the authority of the Temple priesthood in Jerusalem, the radical Jewish nationalist who challenged the Roman occupation and lost, has been almost completely lost to history. That is a shame.”⁶⁴² He closes, “Jesus of Nazareth—Jesus the man—is every bit as compelling, charismatic, and praiseworthy as Jesus the Christ. He is, in short, someone worth believing in.”⁶⁴³ Does Aslan admire any other prophet of Islam as he does the Jesus of Nazareth describing him as “compelling, charismatic, and praiseworthy ... [the one] to sit on God’s throne”? Aslan admires Jesus the zealot for his steadfast commitment in the face of death, even unto death. Aslan’s understandings conflict with formative-classical understandings and venerate the Jesus of Islam,

⁶⁴¹ Ibid, 144.

⁶⁴² Ibid, 215.

⁶⁴³ Ibid.

therefore, this is an example of personal appreciation of ʿĪsā from the least likely of sources.

9.1.2 Al-Jibouri

In the introduction to *al-Jibouri*, I stated his concern about wavering beliefs among Muslims, and I assumed this concern was for Muslims in America because he lived in the United States from 1972 to 2003 and closely observed the missionary activities of both Muslims and non-Muslims in America.⁶⁴⁴ Al-Jibouri says, “This book is meant to strengthen their [Muslims in Christian communities] belief, their faith, and it provides them with many arguments to use with others to attract them towards Islam and to get them to embrace this great faith.”⁶⁴⁵ Al-Jibouri considers possible narratives to draw his Muslim readers back to Muslim understandings and chooses Jesus and Mary in Islam. Using Mary and Jesus in Islam, al-Jibouri offers understandings he believes relevant to attracting others to Islam; Jesus making pigs emerge from a house where there were none without mention of “by Allah’s leave,” and Jesus speaking from the womb. These understandings create tension with formative-classical understandings demonstrating personal appreciation by al-Jibouri for ʿĪsā.

⁶⁴⁴ Al-Jibouri, *Mary and Jesus in Islam*, 12.

⁶⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 181.

9.1.3 Akyol

Akyol closes with the words of Egyptian Khalid Muhammad Khalid (d. 1996 CE), “He [Christ] is the love which knows no hatred, the peace that knows no disquiet, and 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 ... 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.’”⁶⁴⁶ Even “the truthful Messenger” [Muhammad] reveres Christ in this quotation. Akyol’s book begins with a polemic against the deity of the Jesus of the Gospels, moves to a presentation of the beginnings of Islam and the life of the Prophet, then suggests that the Jesus the Jews have been waiting for has appeared. He says, “Yet there is another powerful theme in the Qur’ān that not only has no place within Judaism but has been often avidly rejected by Jews throughout the past two thousand years: that their much-awaited Messiah has already come—and that he is none other than Jesus of Nazareth.”⁶⁴⁷ He then presents his understandings of the Jesus of Islam and reasons for writing his book. He says:

Today we need more religious tolerance, both among Muslims themselves and between Muslims and adherents of other faiths. And realizing that Islam does not simply begin with the Prophet Muhammad in seventh century Arabia but is rather rooted in former manifestations of the Abrahamic archetype, from Abraham to Moses, from James the Just to the Ebionites, would help. It would help build, at

⁶⁴⁶ Khālīd (n.d./1958: 96), Leirvik translation, 187; as cited in Oddbjørn Leirvik, ed., *Images of Jesus Christ in Islam*, 2nd edition (London: A & C Black, 2010), 197. Also see Akyol, *The Islamic Jesus*, 214.

⁶⁴⁷ Akyol, *The Islamic Jesus*, 42.

the very least, a deeper, wider, and wiser Muslim historical imagination. Most important of all, of course, is Jesus.⁶⁴⁸

Akyol, looking for a solution to build more religious tolerance among Muslims and others, scans the prophetic spectrum of Islam and says, “most important of all ... is Jesus.” If one wishes to “facilitate more religious tolerance” and build a “wiser Muslim historical imagination,” Jesus is Akyol’s choice among all the prophets for this task.

The combination of the statements above introduces tension in the Islamic narrative because of the unique potential of the Jesus of Islam and represents personal appreciation of ʿĪsā. Considering the spectrum of prophets for the task of bringing about religious tolerance and understanding, Akyol says Jesus is the prophet who can accomplish this. Akyol may be considering the eschatological role of Jesus in which his view of *nuzūl* ʿĪsā, as an allegorical or metaphorical event, presents the opportunity for ʿĪsā to interact with the ummah and the world in his many descents and ascents. Further Akyol says:

The title “messenger of God,” or *rasulullah*, is very common in the Qurʾān, as it is used for all prophets, from Abraham to Moses to Muhammad. However, Jesus, as we can see, is not only a prophet. He is also “Word from God,” even “Word of God,” and also a “Spirit from God.” Since both of these terms—“Word” and “Spirit”—are never used for any other human being in the Qurʾān, they have generated curiosity for centuries. Islamic scholars, however, have traditionally given a more modest meaning to Jesus’ being the divine Word.⁶⁴⁹

⁶⁴⁸ Ibid, 103.

⁶⁴⁹ Ibid, 162.

Akyol questions the exegeses of Islamic scholars regarding the significance of ʿĪsā’s titles. Akyol says that he does not believe in a divine Jesus and this statement does not suggest that he is wavering in his belief.⁶⁵⁰ However, Akyol demonstrates personal appreciation in his statement for two reasons: First, he positions ʿĪsā as “not only a prophet [like Muhammad]” but a “[unique] human being in the Qur’ān,” second, he suggests that Islamic scholars have been too reserved in their exegesis of Jesus’ titles in the Qur’an making his stature “more modest” than he deserves.⁶⁵¹ Positioning ʿĪsā as unique among the prophets and suggesting he is not being given the degree of uniqueness he deserves creates tension with formative-classical understandings regarding Jesus’ importance among the Islamic prophets and meets the criteria for personal appreciation.

9.1.4 Saritoprak

It was discussed earlier that Saritoprak, in his focus on *nuzūl* ʿĪsā and the events of the end times, believes it possible that “the eschatological figure called the Mahdī is in fact Jesus himself.” He follows this by saying, “Is the Mahdī [ʿĪsā] greater than the Prophet of Islam? All Muslim theologians will answer this question with ‘No’; why then would the Mahdī be able to restore his society so miraculously when even the Prophet

⁶⁵⁰ Ibid, 17.

⁶⁵¹ Ibid, 161-163. Akyol says that formative-classical understandings of Jesus as the “word of God” are too modest, i.e., that he is only the “word of God” in the sense that he was created by God’s word. Akyol’s understanding is that every word of Jesus was the word of God, and it is in this way he should be understood to be the “word of God.”

was unable to do this?”⁶⁵² Saritoprak’s question demonstrates his awareness of the tensions created by his raising this question about Jesus’ eschatological role. The following statements provide insights into Saritoprak’s excitement for the Second Coming of ʿĪsā.

Saritoprak notes, “Similarly, Nursi states that ‘Christian Muslims’ are Muslims in the sight of God but are not known as Muslims per se. It is believed that under the spiritual leadership of Jesus and in cooperation with Islam, these communities will defeat the idea of nonbelief and rescue humanity from the ideology of the denial of God.”⁶⁵³ For Saritoprak, the Jesus of Islam not only unites Christians and Muslims as “Muslims in the sight of God,” but also “rescues humanity” from their disbelief in the one true God. The Jesus of Islam’s accomplishments in his Second Coming, according to Saritoprak’s understandings, cannot be ignored. This statement suggests no other prophet in the Islamic progression of prophets has or will ever accomplish worldwide belief in God and demonstrates personal appreciation of ʿĪsā.

Citing Ibn ʿArabī Saritoprak says, “Ibn ʿArabi has a different approach than that of other Muslim theologians to the resurrection of Jesus. He speaks of two resurrections of Jesus. According to Islamic theology, all people will experience one resurrection. Ibn

⁶⁵² Saritoprak, *Islam’s Jesus*, 99.

⁶⁵³ Nursi, “Mektubat,” 1:413; as cited in Saritoprak, *Islam’s Jesus*, 123; I also discussed earlier that the impact Saritoprak assigns to the life and death of ʿĪsā appears to be more inclusive [his community will include more than Muslims per se, it will include Jews, Christians, and any helpers of Jesus], complete, immediate, and long-lasting (see chapter 7).

‘Arabī said, ‘Jesus will have two resurrections on the Day of Judgment. One with the community of Muhammad and the other as a messenger of God with other divine messengers, peace be upon them all.’”⁶⁵⁴ Ibn ‘Arabī’s statement sets the Jesus of Islam apart from the other prophets and saints who experience only one resurrection, either as part of the ummah, or as a messenger of God. Saritoprak says that Ibn ‘Arabī’s approach is different from that of other theologians, yet he sees enough viability in its foundation to offer it as an alternative understanding. This is personal appreciation of ‘Īsā by Saritoprak because it creates tension regarding the significance of the prophets of Islam.

Saritoprak appears aware of the enthusiasm he has expressed for the accomplishments of Jesus in his Second Coming, *nuzūl* ‘Īsā. Many of his statements, representing personal appreciation of ‘Īsā, have been discussed in this and the preceding chapters. Curiously, because it has no relevance to his current flow of thought regarding the Jesus of Islam, Saritoprak offers a reference to Muhammad’s altruistic nature at the end of his book saying, “After he [Muhammad] visited the city of Ta’if to seek refuge for himself and his community and was violently run out of town, the angel Gabriel came to him and said that God would destroy the entire city if he wished. He said, ‘They do not know what they are doing.’ This is like Jesus’ famous statement ‘Father, forgive them; for

⁶⁵⁴ Ibn ‘Arabī, *Al-Futuhat Al-Makkiya*, 11:289-90; as cited in Saritoprak, *Islam’s Jesus*, 128; Ibn ‘Arabī’s ideas are not to be confused with Ataie’s. Both believe in two deaths and two resurrections of the Jesus of Islam. However, the first resurrection of Jesus is at a different time for each; for Ibn ‘Arabī it is “on the Day of Judgement,” and for Ataie it is three days after his crucifixion (See sections 8.2.1.1 and 9.1.4).

they do not know what they are doing.”⁶⁵⁵ What is of interest to this theme is Saritoprak’s approach to venerating Muhammad. To demonstrate Muhammad’s affection for the community that had provided him refuge, Saritoprak chooses a statement by Muhammad that is like an earlier statement by the Jesus of the Gospels.⁶⁵⁶ By suggesting Muhammad is like the Jesus of the Gospels in altruistic nature, something he did not need to do given the referenced hadīth’s teaching, Saritoprak creates tension in the Islamic narrative, that Muhammad is the preeminent Prophet, by comparing Muhammad to the Jesus of the Gospels and not vice versa; that is, Saritoprak positions ʿĪsā as Muhammad’s example and this represents personal appreciation.

The final two authors, Ataie and Harpci, wrote theses focused on the Jesus of Islam but from different perspectives. Ataie’s understanding of the Jesus of Islam is derived from his perspective of the Johannine *Injīl*, also known as the Gospel of John. Because John’s Gospel has many references to ʿĪsā as “Son of God” and God as “Father,” it presents the opportunity, as demonstrated in previous chapters, for Ataie to offer understandings of the Jesus of Islam that create tension with formative-classical understandings. Harpci writes about the Jesus of Islam through the perspective of Muhammad’s sayings about Jesus and his prophetic role. He too has provided understandings that demonstrate departures from and tension with formative-classical

⁶⁵⁵ Al-Bukhārī 9:84:63. Also see Saritoprak, *Islam’s Jesus*, 137.

⁶⁵⁶ Luke 23:34. This statement was spoken from the cross while the Jesus of the Gospels was being crucified, an event generally denied by formative-classical understandings.

understandings. Both Harpci and Ataie's theses demonstrate appreciation of 'Īsā and offer ideas that are in tension with formative-classical understandings representing personal appreciation of 'Īsā. Some examples of this are given below.

9.1.5 Ataie

Ataie demonstrates pronounced appreciation, and sometimes reverence, for 'Īsā. His thesis is an exegesis of the Gospel of John, which he claims is part of the true *Injil* along with the three Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke).⁶⁵⁷ In John's Gospel, Ataie grapples with many verses that Christians believe affirm the "Sonship" of Jesus as the divine Son of God. Ataie wrestles to exegete these verses to ensure they conform to normative Muslim understandings. Nevertheless, the understandings he extracts demonstrate personal appreciation of Jesus.

One term that Ataie must engage early in the Johannine text is Jesus' reference to God as "Father."⁶⁵⁸ Ataie, as he progresses with his thesis, becomes at ease using the word "Father" for God, which he demonstrates by his frequent use of the term, even when he is not directly quoting Johannine text. Referring to God as "Father" introduces tension in the Islamic narrative due to the transcendent nature of God. Qur'an 112:3-4 says that God neither begets nor is born. By most Muslim understandings, referring to

⁶⁵⁷ Ataie, *Authenticating the Johannine Injil*, 386.

⁶⁵⁸ John 5:17.

God as “Father” implies some form of “begetting” that is contrary to the Qur’an’s teachings. That Ataie was attracted to the Johannine Gospel because of its portrayal of God as Father, is demonstrated when Ataie says that he hopes other Muslims will come to appreciate the Gospel of John as he has. He says, “[John’s Gospel] is a text anchored in God’s oneness and reflective of the loving relationship that Christ has with God. I hope that they [other Muslims] will encounter the Johannine Jesus (‘Īsā) as one who exegetes ‘the Father,’ making ‘Him known’ by making himself known – ‘Whoever has seen me, has seen the Father,’ since he (Jesus) is the sanctified and perfected agent of God’s activity in the world.”⁶⁵⁹ Ataie demonstrates an appreciation for God as “Father” that strains the adjectives “respect,” or “admiration.” Ataie could have omitted the words “loving” and “Father” in the statement above and said that when John or Jesus says “Father” they simply mean “God.” Therefore, what he could have said is, “I hope that Muslims will come to appreciate the Gospel of John as a text anchored in God’s oneness and reflective of the relationship that Christ has with God. I hope that they will encounter the Johannine Jesus (‘Īsā) as one who exegetes God by making himself known – ‘Whoever has seen me, has seen God.’” I would argue that this statement would have sufficed to make Ataie’s point and would have been within formative-classical understandings. But Ataie embellishes this statement with the words “Father,” and “loving.” Going beyond what

⁶⁵⁹ Ataie, *Authenticating the Johannine Injil*, 8-9.

may have been required to exegete this passage and presenting a Jesus in a “loving” relationship with a “Father” is an example of personal appreciation by Ataie.

Several of Ataie’s statements demonstrate his understanding and appreciation of the idea of God as “Father.” In one of Ataie’s frequent references to God as “Father” he says, “In my mind, Jesus’ Qur’ānic title of ‘Spirit of God’ is like the significance of his title ‘Son of God’ in the Gospel of John. To use Buberian language, the Father and the Son, that is to say, the *Rabb* and *Rūh* [Lord and Spirit] enjoy an ‘Ich und Du’ [I and Thou] relationship, and Jesus prays that the disciples might also attain such unitive actualization: ‘that they may also be one in us’ (John 17:21.5).”⁶⁶⁰ Ataie is saying that Jesus’ relationship with God [Father-son, Lord-spirit] is like an ‘Ich und Du’ relationship. According to Ataie this is “Buberian language,” a reference to Martin Buber (d. 1965 CE) and his work *I and Thou*.⁶⁶¹ Sam Woolfe characterized Buber’s ‘Ich und Du’ relationship as: I and Thou relationships are rare and fleeting but a source of ultimate meaning, and the ultimate of these relationships is a mystical experience of being in relationship with an Eternal You, or God, and wanting to have such a relationship with God is, according to Buber, “man’s decisive moment.”⁶⁶² Buber said, “The Thou meets me by grace, it is not

⁶⁶⁰ Ibid, 59; Formative-classical understandings would not affirm a similarity between the Qur’anic “Spirit of God” and the Johannine “Son of God.” Ataie here wrestles with the Johannine text to make it conform to normative understandings. The comparison to Buber’s “I and Thou” relationship which follows does not relieve this tension in my opinion.

⁶⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶⁶² Sam Woolfe, “Book Review: I and Thou by Martin Buber.” *Sam Woolfe* (blog), January 17, 2022. <https://www.samwoolfe.com/2022/01/book-review-i-and-thou-martin-buber.html>

found through seeking.”⁶⁶³ Ataie is saying that the use of Father-son imagery in the Gospel of John suggests that ʿĪsā has an ‘Ich und Du’ relationship with God and that he “prays” that those who follow him could have the same, i.e., a mystical experience of being in relationship with an “Eternal You” or God. The reference to Buber demonstrates personal appreciation of ʿĪsā by Ataie because it creates tension with formative-classical understandings, which do not recognize a Father-Son relationship between ʿĪsā and Allah and venerates ʿĪsā by suggesting that he has this type of intimacy, an ‘Ich und Du’ relationship and can obtain it for others through prayer.⁶⁶⁴

Ataie continues his exegesis regarding God as “Father” and Jesus as “son.” “He is God’s Son in a unique sense as being the direct creation of the One God ... Christ is the incarnation of the Logos in the sense that he is a perfect reflection of the Father at the level of flesh and blood; those who see the Son see the Father because the Son perpetually witnesses the vision of the Father and mediates this vision for others.”⁶⁶⁵ Ataie’s words in these statements demonstrate great respect, reverence and perhaps awe at the person of ʿĪsā. They also demonstrate the ease with which Ataie uses “Father” in his exegeses. It is difficult to imagine another person of whom it can be said that they are the “direct creation,” “incarnation of the Logos,” “perfect reflection,” or that “those who see the Son see the Father.” Perhaps other prophets or saints of Islam may fit under

⁶⁶³ Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, Translated by Ronald Gregor Smith (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1937), 11.

⁶⁶⁴ Qur’an 112:1-4 says that Allah has no child.

⁶⁶⁵ Ataie, *Authenticating the Johannine Injil*, 150-53.

one or more of these characterizations, but it is difficult to identify one who fits all these qualifications, “perpetually,” in their earthly lives. One might find it desirable to meet Ataie’s Jesus more than any other person within the Islamic narrative based on his understandings.

Ataie, exegeting the meaning of John 1:3, “through him [Jesus] all things were made,” says, “Perhaps while the world was made through Christ, it was made for the sake of Muhammad. Perhaps Christ is the “alpha” and Muhammad is the “omega.” Either way, they were both created by God.”⁶⁶⁶ It is interesting to look at Ataie’s use of the word “perhaps” in this statement. In Chapters 5 and 6 above Ataie affirmed that the world was made through Christ, therefore, the use of “perhaps” must apply to the second half of his statement, “it was made for the sake of Muhammad.” Ataie is saying, “While the world was made through Christ, ‘perhaps’ it was made for the sake of Muhammad.” What if the world were not made for the sake of Muhammad, a potential made possible by the word “perhaps”? And if the “perhaps” could be rendered “actually,” it would be up to the reader to decide who was the most important, the one *through whom* all things were made, or the one *for whom* all things were made. Ataie’s statement reveres ‘Īsā and creates tension with formative-classical understandings, therefore it meets the criteria for personal appreciation of ‘Īsā.

⁶⁶⁶ Ibid, 164.

I leave Ataie with a statement I examined earlier, “The ‘whole Jesus’ cannot be captured in a single document, not even John. The real Jesus is expansive. To use al-Ghazālī’s analogy with the Qur’ān in his *Jewels*, Jesus is like an ocean whose most precious stones lie in the great deep.”⁶⁶⁷ That this statement comes at the end of Ataie’s thesis, after he has spent years examining and exegeting the Johannine Gospel and John’s Jesus, demonstrates the level of conscious respect and admiration Ataie has for the person and work of ʿĪsā in Islam.

9.1.6 Harpci

I stated above that Harpci demonstrates the least change from formative-classical understandings of the primary source authors. His thesis presents understandings of the Jesus of Islam according to the sayings of Muhammad, or as he prefers, “Jesus in the Hadīth Tradition.”⁶⁶⁸ Harpci’s thesis affirms formative-classical understandings until he discusses the title “Messiah” as applied to ʿĪsā. He says, “The title al-Masīh - the Messiah - is applied specifically to Jesus alone. This passage gives Jesus an extremely exalted position and recognizes that he has qualities possessed by no other prophet, and one of these positions or qualities is his being the Messiah (Qur’ān 4:171).”⁶⁶⁹ Harpci’s words “extremely” and “possessed by no other prophet” suggest his personal disposition

⁶⁶⁷ Ibid, 389.

⁶⁶⁸ Harpci, *Muhammad Speaking of the Messiah*, 2013.

⁶⁶⁹ Ibid, 137.

towards ʿĪsā. Can any other prophet of Islam rise to this level of significance or “extremely exalted position”?

Harpci’s thesis is informative, but disappointing in its early stages. It is informative because it is an excellent baseline for formative-classical understandings of the Jesus of Islam. It is disappointing in its early stages because it does not add to the existing body of knowledge until, late in the text, Harpci introduces the idea that the Second Coming of ʿĪsā could be allegorical instead of literal. I discussed above how this understanding represents variance from formative-classical understandings which embrace a literal physical descent rather than an allegorical one. Harpci’s view, that *nuzūl* ʿĪsā can be allegorical rather than literal, becomes the pivot in his thesis from restatements of well-established formative-classical understandings to changes in those understandings. He brings new ideas forward regarding the potential for *nuzūl* ʿĪsā to be occurring now. His writing moves from reporting information to suggesting new possibilities and his energy and writing tone moves from stoical to enthusiastic. For example, Harpci speaking of *nuzūl* ʿĪsā says, “Jesus in the last days just before the Day of Resurrection ... will destroy the false doctrines that pass under his name and prepare the way for the universal acceptance of the religion of Islam and the straight way of the Qur’ān.”⁶⁷⁰ Keeping in mind that he believes this could be occurring at any time given the allegorical nature of *nuzūl* ʿĪsā, Harpci is suggesting this may occur soon, even now. Harpci closes his thesis by

⁶⁷⁰ Ibid, 139.

saying, “Jesus then, is in a heavenly spiritual dimension close to the earthly realm. He, as well as others in the spiritual worlds, is in a position to influence earthly matters as God wills.”⁶⁷¹ Harpci’s personal appreciation of ʿĪsā is a result of his belief that *nuzūl* ʿĪsā is allegorical. The benefits to Islam, the ummah, and the world, of a Jesus who can descend and ascend whenever he desires to accomplish “earthly matters as God wills” are many and the object of hope and encouragement for Harpci, since this could be occurring now. His ideas strain beyond formative-classical understandings and represent personal appreciation of ʿĪsā.

9.2 Conclusions

The findings articulated in this chapter are the most unexpected. An author may write about a person they hold in esteem or contempt; therefore, I could make no prediction of what the primary sources might say or think of the Jesus of Islam because they chose to make him the subject of their book or thesis. It is possible that all the authors could have written about the Jesus of Islam consistent with formative-classical understandings. The unexpected is that every author demonstrates a respect for ʿĪsā that creates tension with formative-classical understandings, what I have defined as personal appreciation. Were the authors consciously aware of the tension caused by some of their understandings? Because this is not possible to answer analytically, the concept of

⁶⁷¹ Ibid, 202.

‘personal appreciation’ as defined at the beginning of this chapter was developed to identify an author’s personal esteem for ʿĪsā without the need to determine conscious intent.

It was unknown at the start of the research whether Khalidi’s observation, that the Jesus of Islam is evolving, could be observed in a contemporary American Muslim setting. This did occur and Chapters 4-8 capture the thematic drift in understandings of Jesus of Islam. The unexpected is that *all* the primary sources offer statements representing personal appreciation of ʿĪsā; some significant examples are restated in the Conclusion in Chapter 10. I return to the question: Why do all the authors demonstrate movement in understandings from formative-classical understandings? The question demands a response, and some possible explanations will be addressed in the next chapter.

Chapter 10 – Conclusions

Khalidi believes that the Jesus of Islam has evolved from the ascetic saint of formative-classical Islam to “the lord of nature, the miracle worker, the healer, the social and ethical model of modern Islam.” In the Literature Review, I demonstrated that several authors have validated Khalidi’s observation; that understandings of the Jesus of Islam have been evolving since formative-classical understandings. I stated that I did not intend to validate Khalidi’s work but go beyond his analysis to ask if the Jesus of Islam is changing today, especially amongst Muslim authors writing in an American context. Schumann said that as of 2002, there was no comprehensive account in Christian circles of Muslim observations on Christ that takes present day views into account. The Literature Review demonstrated that Schumann’s observation remains true. Therefore, I intend to address the gap identified by Schumann and the Literature Review, as a non-Muslim writing about contemporary Muslims’ understandings of the Jesus of Islam. I begin by returning to the research question: The Portrayal of Jesus in Islam Amongst Contemporary Muslims Writing to the American Public: In What Ways do Their Writings Represent Continuity and Change in Relation to Formative-Classical Muslim Understandings? In this Chapter I answer this question and provide observations and questions for further research.

10.1 Evolution in understandings

I have identified and quantified departures from formative-classical understandings by author and theme using the methodology outlined in the Introduction. Nine themes representing variations from formative-classical understandings have been arranged into five chapters. How these authors and themes demonstrate evolution has been discussed in the chapters above and need not be repeated. However, I can summarize the ideas presented in this thesis by author and conclude that Harpci and al-Jibouri are consistent with formative-classical understandings but go beyond their teachings. This is not unexpected since I identified both Harpci and al-Jibouri in their introduction as desiring to correct misunderstandings and eliminate ignorance amongst Muslims in America regarding the Jesus of Islam. To accomplish this, both stay close to texts that shaped formative-classical understandings or affirm them, such as the Gospel of Barnabas.

Saritoprak's understandings create tension with formative classical understandings. This too is expected as he was quoted as saying he prefers the "interpretive approach" as a "middle way" to understanding Islamic texts because it avoids the extremism that sometimes accompanies the literalist approach and misunderstandings that accompany the denial approach. Saritoprak's "middle way" occasionally results in understandings that create tension with formative-classical understandings.

Ataie, Akyol and Aslan demonstrate significant deviations from formative-classical understandings. Ataie and Akyol present understandings that create tension with

formative-classical understandings. This was proposed as a potentiality in the introduction. Regarding Ataie, who accepts the Johannine Gospel as the *Injil* of ʿĪsā, it was suggested that he would introduce new ideas and understandings of the Jesus of Islam as he used his “polemirenical” approach, “an attempt to harmonize the Christology of the Bible with the Qur’an, albeit under the framework of Islamic normativity.” I discussed that Akyol, trying to present a winsome Jesus of Islam to attract new Muslims and reform Islam in the West, offers ideas that promote understandings of the Jesus of Islam that are fascinating, potentially controversial, and represent significant movements from formative-classical understandings.

Aslan demonstrates the greatest variance from formative-classical understandings offering understandings that conflict with formative-classical understandings. In the introduction to his work, I discussed his “reclaiming” the Jesus of Islam into Jesus of Nazareth or historical Jesus understandings therefore this result was anticipated.

I can also summarize the themes discussed above by their evolutionary classifications. Themes relating to ʿĪsā’s revelatory stature and his being the climax of human history complement formative-classical understandings. Themes relating to ʿĪsā’s unique relationship with Allah, unique mother, being the living revelation of Allah, being the object of personal appreciation, being the ultimate hope for Islam, and being a martyr for Israel’s sake create tension with formative-classical understandings. The theme relating to ʿĪsā as a zealot opposed to social evil presents Aslan’s understandings which conflict with formative-classical understandings.

Having identified and quantified the movements in understandings of contemporary Muslim authors writing in an American context about the Jesus of Islam, I can answer the main question: In what ways do the writings of the primary sources represent continuity and change in relation to formative-classical Muslim understandings?

10.2 Continuity and change

I find that understandings of the Jesus of Islam are evolving in an American context within nine themes and towards one of two theological understandings. These two understandings can be differentiated from formative-classical Muslim understandings by the terms “historical Jesus” and “Jesus of the Gospels” understandings; the term “historical Jesus” refers to understandings that position Jesus as a historical character without divinity or supernatural abilities, and the term “Jesus of the Gospels” denotes understandings of Jesus derived from the four Gospels of the Christian New Testament. The figure below conveys my findings.

Primary Source Understandings of ʿĪsā

	Movement from Formative-Classical Understandings of ʿĪsā	Date of Publication	Author References Aslan
Reza Aslan	----->	2013	
Fatih Harpci	->	2013	
Yasin al-Jibouri	-->	2014	
Zeki Saritoprak	----->	2014	Y
Ali Ataie	----->	2016	Y
Mustafa Akyol	----->	2017	Y

Aslan is significant because he precipitated the exchange of ideas by at least three of my primary sources to correct the influence he may have had on American Muslims as his understandings represented significant variance from formative-classical understandings; Saritoprak, Ataie, and Akyol reference Aslan’s *Zealot* in their texts. Their works and those of Harpci and al-Jibouri demonstrate deviations, but they move in a different direction from Aslan, towards Jesus of the Gospels understandings, though none fully embrace this understanding, specifically the divinity of Christ. The figure can be revised as follows to illustrate this:

Primary Source Understandings of ʿĪsā

	Movement from Formative-Classical Understandings of ʿĪsā	Date of Publication	Author References Aslan	
Reza Aslan	----->	2013		} Historical Jesus
Fatih Harpci	->	2013		
Yasin al-Jibouri	-->	2014		} Jesus of the Gospels
Zeki Saritoprak	----->	2014	Y	
Ali Ataie	----->	2016	Y	
Mustafa Akyol	----->	2017	Y	

I answer the question: The Jesus of Islam is evolving in an American context from formative-classical understandings according to nine themes and the evolution represents both continuity and change in one of two directions; historical Jesus, or Jesus of the Gospels understandings. I presented the nine themes in Chapters 5-9. The five chapters were: 5-The Uniqueness of ʿĪsā, 6-The Nature of ʿĪsā as the Word of Allah, 7-Prophet of Hope - Future and Present, 8-Zealot and Martyr, and 9-Object of Personal Appreciation. I will revisit the ideas representing variation in each of these chapters and comment on how they represent continuity and/or change.

Chapter 5 - The Uniqueness of ʿĪsā. There are several ideas that demonstrate significant evolution and either complement or create tension with formative-classical understandings to include: ʿĪsā is unique in both praise and being according to the Qurʿan;

Jesus is like no other mortal and is afforded [in the Qur'an] "exceptionally sublime praise" that is given to no other mortal including Muhammad; 'Īsā is "the most beloved of all creation;" 'Īsā is God's first and most exalted creation "the firstborn of all creation;" 'Īsā is God's sanctified agent and theomorphic 'image,' his actions on earth represent the actions of God, thus, "he is indeed equal with God at some level."⁶⁷²

Chapter 6 - The Nature of 'Īsā as the Word of Allah. There are several ideas that demonstrate significant evolution and create tension with formative-classical understandings to include: Jesus may be the Word of God not as merely a creative word, but also an ongoing word of revelation; Jesus was not merely receiving occasional revelations like other prophets, every word of his was revelation by God; Jesus' speech is God's speech because he is the sanctified and guided word of God; and 'Īsā is the living revelation of Allah, speaking Allah's words, always present with Allah's followers, because he can come and go from Allah to His followers as sent by Allah due to the spiritual nature of his *nuzūl* 'Īsā to bring words of encouragement to strengthen them in their spiritual journeys, past, present and future.

Chapter 7 - Prophet of Hope - Future and Present. There are several ideas that demonstrate significant movement and create tension with formative-classical understandings to include: 'Īsā's return can be an on-going event, it can be happening now, bringing blessings to the ummah and individual Muslims; because 'Īsā's return is

⁶⁷² Ataie, *Authenticating the Johannine Injil*, 229.

allegorical or metaphorical, the ummah can expect the benefits and blessings of his return today; Islam's only hope for reform, to make Islam relevant to modernity and bring the Caliphate to the waiting world, is the person they share with the other Abrahamic religions, the Jesus of Nazareth (ʿĪsā); the words of Jesus are far more authoritative than other prophets, and of the same revelatory nature as the Qur'an; a caliphate, which is the way Muslims organized themselves for centuries after Muhammad's death, is not something Muslims need to wait to experience literally, but it can be achieved within each Muslim's heart today; the Muslim community does not have to wait to experience the renewal of Islam promised by *nuzūl* ʿĪsā, they can experience it now if they submit themselves to be disciples of the Jesus of Islam; and ʿĪsā can descend as a spirit to have fellowship with the ummah as individuals and, since he is not constrained by a physical body, he can do this often.

Chapter 8 - ʿĪsā as a Zealot and Martyr. I discussed Aslan's contribution to this chapter and concluded that his understandings move in a direction opposite to the other primary sources and towards historical Jesus understandings, which conflict with formative-classical understandings, to include: Jesus was not born of a virgin; he did no miracles; he was not a peaceful man but a zealot trying to remove the Roman oppressors from Israel; and his zeal offended both the Romans and Jewish leaders of his day resulting in his crucifixion on a cross between two other zealots.

Ataie offers ideas within this theme that demonstrate significant departures from formative-classical understandings and create tension with those understandings: Jesus'

body expired during crucifixion, but his soul escaped; the resurrection of Christ involves receiving a body for post-mortem appearances; and the ascension of Jesus occurred after receiving a resurrected body (formative-classical understandings would suggest Jesus' ascension occurred before his apparent death). Ataie offers an idea within this theme that conflicts with formative-classical understandings: The transgressions of the children of Israel were laid upon him [ʿĪsā] and he went willingly and selflessly to his death. The importance of the word transgression when formative-classical understandings would have selected suffering is discussed in Chapter 8 and this idea conflicts with formative-classical understandings.

Chapter 9 - ʿĪsā as the Object of Personal Appreciation. All the primary sources demonstrated personal appreciation of ʿĪsā. Aslan says, "God's sovereignty could not be established except through force ... as God's agent on earth—the one who wielded God's finger—Jesus himself was ushering in the Kingdom of God and establishing God's dominion through his miraculous actions." Al-Jibouri, looking for the most winsome argument possible within the Islamic narrative to draw his Muslim readers back towards Muslim understandings, chooses Jesus and Mary in Islam to show "how Jesus Christ and his saintly mother are very, very highly revered."⁶⁷³ Akyol, looking for a solution to build more religious tolerance among Muslims and others, scans the prophetic spectrum of Islam and says, "most important of all ... is Jesus." Saritoprak's understanding of the Jesus

⁶⁷³ Al-Jibouri, *Mary and Jesus in Islam*, 181.

of Islam suggests no other prophet in the Islamic progression of prophets has or will ever accomplish worldwide belief in God except Jesus. Ataie says he hopes that Muslims will come to appreciate the Gospel of John as a text anchored in God's oneness and reflective of the loving relationship that Christ has with God. Further, he hopes Muslims will encounter the Johannine Jesus as one who reveals "the Father," making "Him known" by making himself known, since Jesus is the sanctified and perfected agent of God's activity in the world. Harpci's belief that *nuzūl* 'Īsā is allegorical causes him to conclude that the benefits to Islam, the ummah, and the world, of a Jesus who can descend and ascend whenever he wishes are many and Jesus is the object of hope and encouragement.

Regarding continuity, all the major themes, and contributors to those themes, recognize Jesus as a historical person demonstrating admirable qualities worthy of emulation. Except for Aslan, the primary source authors, and themes representing their understandings, maintain a distinctly Muslim identity. I.e., Aslan's contribution to Theme 7 – *Zealot Opposed to Social Evil*, represents historical Jesus understandings, whereas the other themes and primary sources remain distinctly separate from both historical Jesus and Jesus of the Gospels understandings by supporting Jesus' virgin birth (by a word of God and not as the Son of God), miraculous powers (by Allah's permission), and unique relationship with Allah (but not as God's Son), and where these understandings are expanded, few contradictions with formative-classical understandings occur with no author implying that Jesus as the word of Allah is in some way divine like Jesus of the Gospels. Except for Aslan, the evolution of formative-classical understandings by the

primary sources represent appreciations of Jesus in the direction of the Jesus of the Gospels. For example, al-Ghazālī's analogy is about the depth and beauty of the Qur'an. Ataie's use of this analogy appears to compare Jesus to the Qur'an and move him from the category of prophets in Islam to the category of eternal word of God. Regarding continuity I conclude that, excluding Aslan, the primary sources maintain distinctly Muslim understandings of the Jesus of Islam despite the change in understandings they introduce.

Regarding change, the Jesus of Islam is evolving in the American context according to the understandings of contemporary Muslim authors writing to the American public to the point of conflict with formative-classical understandings according to: The Uniqueness of 'Īsā, The Nature of 'Īsā as the Word of Allah, 'Īsā as a Prophet of Hope - Future and Present, 'Īsā as a Zealot and Martyr, and 'Īsā as the Object of Personal Appreciation. This evolution is towards one of two directions, historical Jesus, and Jesus of the Gospels understandings. What observations can be made from these findings?

10.3 Observations

Khalidi says, "The Jesus of the Gospels is utterly different from his Quranic image ... he is the only prophet in the Qur'ān who is deliberately made to distance himself from the doctrines that his community is said to hold of him."⁶⁷⁴ If I assume the "community"

⁶⁷⁴ Khalidi, *The Muslim Jesus*, 12.

Khalidi references is one that embraces “Jesus of the Gospel” understandings, I suggest that the “distance” Khalidi observed in Jesus of formative-classical understandings and Jesus of the Gospels understandings is closing. This raises several questions: First, what implications does this have on Muslim culture or theology in America?; second, are there any discernible factors that can be identified to explain the changes in understandings by the primary sources from formative-classical understandings?; third, is ʿĪsā in America creating tension in the Islamic narrative which presents Muhammad as the greater prophet?; and lastly, is ʿĪsā in America becoming more like the Gospel Jesus as traditionally understood and closing the gap between Muslim and Christian understandings, or is he becoming more estranged than ever from the Jesus of the Gospels? These could be questions for future theses, but I will offer thoughts on each.

What implications does this have on Muslim culture or theology in America? From a cultural perspective, Muslims and non-Muslims need to be aware of the evolution of Jesus within the Islamic narrative as defined in this thesis. The drift of the Jesus of Islam towards historical Jesus or Jesus of the Gospels understandings offers opportunity for inter-faith dialogue around the person of Jesus. From a theological perspective, Muslims will need to assess the evolutions in understandings of the Jesus of Islam whether towards historical Jesus or Jesus of the Gospels understandings. Variance in either direction creates tension in the Islamic narrative challenging long-held beliefs about the nature of the Jesus of Islam and his position among the prophets of Islam.

Are there any discernible factors that can be identified to explain the drifts in understandings by the primary sources from formative-classical understandings? I discussed al-Jibouri's concern for a drift in Islamic understandings of the Jesus of Islam from formative-classical understandings amongst Muslims in America. The immersion of Islamic immigrants in an American culture shaped by Judeo-Christian, secular, and Black Muslim beliefs creates an opportunity for syncretism out of a desire by immigrant Muslims to fit into American communities. Abdullah Saeed attributes this [syncretism] to, "a product of fusion of Islam with the Western environment and Western secular liberal democratic values ... the Western tradition of Islam is challenging traditional [formative-classical] understandings."⁶⁷⁵ Another observation discussed in Chapter 9 is a genuine affection for the person of Jesus, even to the point of personal appreciation. Lastly, because many Muslims believe the second return of Jesus is imminent, they are motivated to read more about his person and eschatological accomplishments.⁶⁷⁶ This along with the possibility that *nuzūl* 'Īsā may be an allegorical or spiritual event allows the possibility for immediate realization of the benefits of Jesus' return. In summary, Muslims have a reason to be excited about the Jesus of Islam therefore they are willing to read and entertain new ideas about him.

⁶⁷⁵ Abdullah Saeed, *Islamic Thought: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2006), 153.

⁶⁷⁶ Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project. "The World's Muslims: Unity and Diversity," August 9, 2012, 58, 66.

Is ʿĪsā in America creating tension in the Islamic narrative regarding Muhammad as the greater prophet? A distinction I did not intend to address was that of character and office of a prophet of Islam. Each prophet has character, a reputation earned by actions in life, and office, a positional authority given by Allah. I discussed that ʿĪsā is considered the penultimate prophet to Muhammad by formative-classical understandings. I highlighted the tension with this understanding throughout this text, but I did not make a distinction regarding the primary source authors' understandings on the character and/or office of ʿĪsā and Muhammad. The tensions I have identified affect the character and office of both, but in what ways? Using this thesis as a foundation, this question would be a candidate for future research.

Is ʿĪsā in America becoming more like the Gospel Jesus and closing the gap between Muslim and Christian understandings, or is he becoming more estranged than ever from the Gospel Jesus? I have demonstrated that none of the primary sources consistently presents formative-classical understandings of ʿĪsā. Five of the authors demonstrate movement towards the Jesus of the Gospels understandings while Aslan demonstrates drift towards historical Jesus understandings.

10.4 Questions for further research

I have identified and quantified variances in understandings of the Jesus of Islam from formative-classical understandings and inspired new questions. Some of these include: To what extent is ʿĪsā being adapted or contextualized as a Muslim to be more

suiting for modern American society? Is ʿĪsā in America becoming a bellwether that can be used to separate orthodoxy from heterodoxy in Islam? Are the movements that I have identified more impactful upon the character and/or the office of Jesus and Muhammad in Islam? How do these findings address Aslan's statement that reformation of Islam will begin with Muslim Americans? Are African American Muslims influencing the understandings of Muslim immigrants regarding ʿĪsā? How are Christian converts to Islam in America affecting the understanding of the Jesus of Islam among American Muslims?

10.5 Final comments

The Jesus of Islam as portrayed in the recent American context is evolving and the direction of his evolution, whether towards historical Jesus, Jesus of the Gospels, or other understandings, will have an influence upon Islam in America and the world. Being a significant figure in Islam, any change in Jesus' persona and moral authority will impact the beliefs and actions of his followers. Khalidi says:

Here is a Jesus who on one hand is shorn of Christology, but who on the other is endowed with attributes which render him meta-historical and even, so to speak, meta-religious. In his Muslim habitat, Jesus becomes an object of intense devotion, reverence, and love. But as he advances inside the Islamic tradition, he ceases to be an argument and becomes a living and vital moral voice, demanding to be heard by all who seek a unity of profession and witness.⁶⁷⁷

⁶⁷⁷ Khalidi, *The Muslim Jesus*, 45.

I have discussed how Khalidi's interpretation of "advances inside the Islamic tradition" includes evolution as lord of nature, miracle worker, and healer possessing an authority that appears to evolve such that he does not need to request God's permission to do his works. Khalidi believes that if the Jesus of Islam evolves in this manner, he will become a "moral voice demanding to be heard" which will impact Muslims in America and the world. Likewise, if the Jesus of Islam does not evolve as Khalidi has observed, perhaps towards historical Jesus understandings, his influence will be lessened among American Muslims because of his diminished persona. Either way, the evolution of the Jesus of Islam will have an influence upon Islam in America and the world because of Muslim influence in the world.

Beaumont has studied opportunities for better Muslim-Christian dialogue on the person of Jesus and I paraphrase his conclusion: Christians have responded to Muslim understandings of Jesus in three ways: First, they reject Muslim claims as false and dismiss them *a priori*; second, they distance themselves so there is no opportunity for serious dialogue; and third, they attempt to take Muslims seriously as people of good faith whose understandings of the Jesus of Islam need to be understood in order to properly position them relative to Christian understandings. Beaumont says the third approach is imperative if Christians want to learn and live with Muslims without falling into the error of the first two approaches.⁶⁷⁸ I decided to embrace the third approach

⁶⁷⁸ Mark Beaumont, *Presenting Christ to Muslims: Christian Theologians in Dialogue with Muslims* (Oxford: Regnum Books, 2019), 2.

and fill the literary gap on contemporary Muslim understandings of the Jesus of Islam in an American context.

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