

# Engaging with Islam

## IS JESUS GOD? - SESSION 10

### PART 1: Preparation

The Christian belief that Jesus is God is called the *incarnation*. The Qur'an explicitly teaches Muslims to reject this idea; it says Jesus was only a man. Therefore, this topic may come up when talking with a Muslim. The incarnation is a beautiful subject and Christians need to prepare themselves to be able to talk about it.

#### God and Logic - Talking about the Divinity of Jesus

A common mistake Christians make when talking to Muslims about the divinity of Jesus is to start with Jesus. We *assume* that Christians and Muslims agree about God, creation, and humanity, and only differ when it comes to Jesus, and so we argue about him (diagram 1).

However, Christians and Muslims actually have a completely different understanding of God, creation, and humanity; and it is these differences that lead to our different understandings of Jesus, and why the incarnation is illogical to a Muslim (diagram 2).

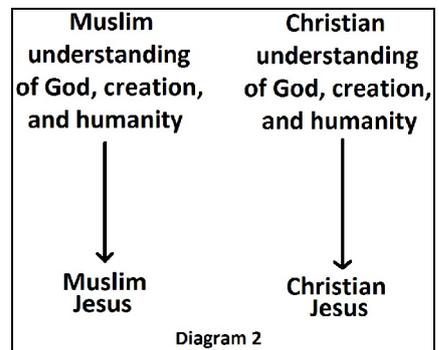
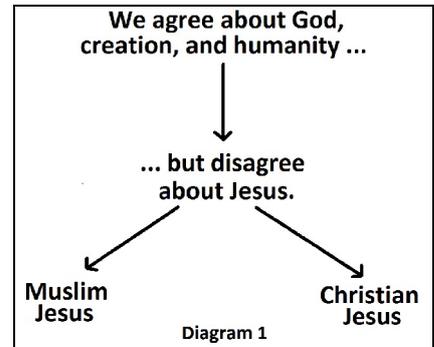
If we want to explain the divinity of Jesus to a Muslim we need to start by talking about the nature of God, creation, and humanity, then we can move to the person of Jesus. We need to take steps towards the incarnation and lay a foundation for it. If we don't we will have no common foundation for understanding it.

#### Step 1: God and Creation

The common Muslim view of God is that God is so transcendent, glorious, and separate from creation, that it is therefore impossible for him to connect with creation and become incarnate. In this view, to say God connected with creation is to say God changed his very nature and stopped being God.

While this view seeks to protect God's transcendence and glory it actually denies that God is the creator. It denies God is the creator because *every time* God interacts with creation he connects with it in some way. Consider the following: When God made creation or sustains creation or is present throughout creation or speaks to creation, there is some type of connection. If there is no connection then God is not doing it! However, none of these connections in any way stop God being transcendent or glorious. God can connect with creation without changing or compromising his divine nature.

This is important to know because it is a foundation for the incarnation. The doctrine of the incarnation says that in the person of Jesus a divine and created nature connect: Jesus is fully God and



fully man, and neither nature is compromised. This understanding is consistent with, and a beautiful new expression of, how God interacts with creation. Therefore you need to discuss with Muslims whether or not God connects with creation when he creates, sustains, is present, or speaks to it.

### Step 2: God as he is in himself and God as he is towards us.

A Muslim may say that God is all powerful, all knowing, all present, and eternal; he is limitless and therefore cannot be limited to a man. But this does not understand an important aspect of how God relates to us. There is a difference between God as he is in his transcendence, or in himself, and God as he is towards us. Yes, he is all powerful but he does not *express* all his power towards us. He is all knowing but does not make all his knowledge known to us. He is all present yet access to his personal presence is expressed in a local way by dwelling with his people. He is eternal yet reveals himself to us in time. He is the just judge yet we do not see all his justice expressed in the world now but wait for Judgement Day. He is free to act as he wants yet makes covenants to limit himself to a particular course of faithful action. That is, *every time* God interacts with creation he limits himself.

God expresses himself in a true but limited way to his creation. He *accommodates* himself to his creation so that his creation may know him. This does not at all take away from God's majesty or limit who he is in himself; it just acknowledges the way God expresses himself to us. God's accommodation to us is an important foundation for understanding how Jesus is God: God has accommodated himself to us in the man Jesus. This is an important step to discuss with Muslims.

### Step 3: God dwells with his people.

God's plan has always been to personally dwell with his people and for them to know him. Jesus is the fulfilment of this plan.

While God's nature transcends the created order, this transcendence does not mean he is isolated and unknowable to his creation. God created us to dwell and fellowship with him, and he has always created a means of communicating his *person* and *presence* to us. We see this in Eden (Gen. 3:8), the temple (Ex. 25:8), and the word of God. In all of these, God's person and presence are communicated by his Spirit. This is another foundation for how we understand the incarnation: God communicates his personal presence to us through the man Jesus. You need to ask Muslims if God can reveal his presence to us?

### Step 4: The Image of God

The doctrine of the image of God teaches that God has made a connection between humanity and himself. Humans represent God's rule in creation (Gen. 1:26), are to display his character (Lev. 19:2), and are to share in his glory (Gen. 2:9, 3:22, Ps. 8, 82). This is another important foundation for understanding the incarnation, because when God comes to us as a man he is using a human body that he himself created with the purpose of representing him, displaying his character, and sharing in his glory.

However, in the Qur'an, and popular Islamic belief, there is no image of God; no connection

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<sup>1</sup>There is a Sunni hadith (*Sahih Muslim*: bk. 40, no. 6809) about Adam being made in Allah's image 30 meters tall, but this hadith seems to have little theological impact for popular Islam.

between God and humanity, and no plan for humanity to share in God's glory<sup>2</sup>. This means Christians and Muslims have a completely different understanding of what it means to be human.

#### Steps 1-4: Summary

If we want to help Muslims understand how Jesus is fully God and fully man we first need to agree about what it means to be God and what it means to be man. If we cannot agree about these we are unlikely to agree about Jesus. Once we have come to some sort of agreement on these subjects we can then approach the New Testament and discuss Jesus.

#### Step 5: The Humanity and Divinity of Jesus

The Gospels demonstrate the full humanity and full divinity of Jesus. We see his full humanity in that he was born, grew, learned, ate, prayed, suffered, was tempted (yet do not sin), died, and rose from the dead.

We see the full divinity of Jesus in that he is:

- Preexistent, John 1:1.
- The Creator John 1:1-3.
- The fulfilment of the coming of God in Isaiah 40:2-3, Malachi 3:1 > Mark 1:1-3.
- He does what only God can do in the way God does it.
  - Forgave people their sin, Mark 2:5-7.
  - His presence led to a conviction of sin, Luke 5:8.
  - He calmed the storm, Psalm 107:23-30 > Mark 4:35.
  - Walked on water, Job 9:8 > Mark 6:45ff.
  - Commanded spirits, 1 Kings 22 > Mark 5:7-8.
  - Chooses who is saved, Matthew 11:27.
- He is the husband to God's people, Isaiah 54:5, Jeremiah 3:14; Ezekiel 16:32, Hosea 1-2 (2:19-20) > Mark 2:19, John 3:29.
- And finally Jesus says it: Matthew 26:63-66, Mark 12:35ff, John 5:16-23, 8:58, 10:29-39, 14:8-9, Isaiah 44:6 > Revelation 1:17, 22:13.

Show these verses to your Muslim friend.

Q1. What would you say to a Muslim who said: Numbers 23:19 says "God is not a man ..." Therefore the Bible says Jesus cannot be God.

#### Step 6: Jesus in the Qur'an

You may not want to take this step, but it is an option, and good to know. The Qur'an is not consistent in its portrayal of Jesus. On many occasions it states that Jesus is not God, yet it has him do things that uniquely define God. For example God is the only creator. This is a unique God defining attribute. Yet in the Qur'an we see that Jesus has this attribute and expresses it in exactly the same way as God: God creates Adam from clay and breathes into him the breath of life.

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<sup>2</sup>It could be argued that Muhammad shares in Allah's glory but this will not be pursued at the moment.

When your Lord said to the angels, “I shall create mankind from clay. When I have formed him and breathed some of my Spirit into him ... I created (him) with my own hands.” (Q. 38:71-75, Jones)

And in exactly the same way Jesus creates:

I (Jesus) have come to you with a sign from your Lord. I will create for you out of clay the likeness of a bird; then I will breathe into it, and it will be a bird, by the permission of God. (Q. 3:49, Arberry)

This story of Jesus creating birds comes from an early Christian fable about the childhood of Jesus. Muhammad has changed the original story by adding that Jesus only did this by God’s permission; however, this does not remove Jesus’ divinity from the story, because creating is a unique attribute that defines God. If Jesus is not God, and God could give this permission to anyone, then God is not unique and Islam becomes pantheism. Jesus creating in exactly the same way as God is a possible talking point with Muslims.

### Conclusion

The Qur’an teaches Muslims to reject our biggest and most beautiful doctrines. Learning how to explain and defend these doctrines requires time and effort, but it is worth it because it makes us learn our own faith better. If a Muslim asks you to explain the incarnation I recommend you start by reading together the booklet, *Is Jesus God?* [http://engagingwithislam.org/leaflets/Is\\_Jesus\\_God.pdf](http://engagingwithislam.org/leaflets/Is_Jesus_God.pdf)



### **PART 2: Video Presentation** (15 minutes) <https://youtu.be/z8b6UpxbXSU>

Who is Jesus?

The Incarnation and Logic

- Image
- God dwells with his people.
- God is free and able to do as he wills.

The Popular Understanding of God in Islam

The Academic Understanding of God in Islam.

- Image, *Sahih al-Bukhari*: vol. 8, bk 74, no. 246.
- Muhammad shares in the attributes of God (Q. 9:128).
- God in Creation: Moses (Q. 4:164, 20:9-ff, 27:7-10, 28:28ff), Judgement Day (Q. 75:22-23).
- The Spirit of God appeared as a man, and agent of God (Q. 19:17).



Muslims believe the Qur'an is God's eternal, uncreated, divine Word and that it is part of creation.

Did God change?

- The image of God means God can display himself through a man therefore no change.
- God dwelling with his people is God's plan therefore no change.
- Jesus has two natures: one divine and one created. The divine did not change but connected with a human nature to express his person to us.
- It is God accommodating himself to us.

How can God die?

Where did Jesus say I am God worship me? (Exodus 3:14, Daniel 7:13-14, Psalm 82, 110)

“God is not a man” Numbers 23:19

### **PART 3: Discussion**

Q2. Do you have any comments about the video?

Q3. If a Muslim asks you to explain how Jesus is God what is an easy place to start with your answer?

### **Answers**

Q1. Read the whole verse. It is talking about how God is not a man because he does not lie. It is not referring to the possibility of God coming to us as a man.

Q3. Read with them the booklet, *Is Jesus God*.  
[http://engagingwithislam.org/leaflets/Is\\_Jesus\\_God.pdf](http://engagingwithislam.org/leaflets/Is_Jesus_God.pdf)



### **PART 4: Activities**

Have you done the following? Circle an answer.

- Smile at a Muslim. Greet the Muslims you know. Yes/No.
- Pray privately, and publicly at church, for the Islamic world and the Muslims you know, and for Christians who are suffering under Islam. Yes/No.

- Ask a Muslim if they know what books are in the Bible. Yes/No.
- Ask a Muslim if they believe in the Day of Judgement. If they do ask if they have done enough good deeds. Yes/No.
- Invite a Muslim to read Matthew and then meet with them and talk about it using the Matthew outline presented in session 7. Yes/No.
- Have you done your group activities? Yes/No.