

“Who Do You Say That I Am?” Jesus and the Perfect Man

By Stratford Caldecott

The great Sufi Shaykh, Muhyiddin Ibn ‘Arabi, claimed to have been taught by Jesus. “I have had many meetings with him in visions, and at his hands I turned [to God]. He prayed for me that I be established in the religious life, both in this world and in the hereafter, and he called me beloved. He ordered me to practice renunciation and detachment.”¹ “He was my first teacher, through whom I returned [to God]; he is immensely kind towards me and does not neglect me even for an instant.”²

So who and what is this Jesus, the friend and teacher of Ibn ‘Arabi? In his chapter on Jesus in his book on the Prophets (the *Fusus al-Hikam* or *Bezels of Wisdom*), a commentary on the Qur’an that he believed had been divinely inspired, Ibn ‘Arabi draws our attention to Qur’anic verse 4:171 that describes Jesus as God’s “word deposited with Mary, and a spirit from Himself.” He comments that “Gabriel was, in fact, transmitting God’s word to Mary, just as an apostle transmits His word to his community.”³ He also says in the opening of the chapter: “God purified him [Jesus] in body and made him transcendent/In the Spirit, making him like Himself in creating.”⁴ An alternative translation by Reza

¹ Cited in Stephen Hirstenstein, *The Unlimited Mercifier: The Spiritual Life and Thought of Ibn ‘Arabi* (Anqa Publishing, 1999), pp. 53

² *Ibid.*, p. 54.

³ *Ibn Al ‘Arabi: The Bezels of Wisdom*, trans. R.W.J. Austin (SPCK, 1980), p. 175. Of course, to call Jesus the “word” of God does not carry the theological weight that it does in the Christian tradition. Nevertheless, at least one commentator, Samuel Zinner, is of the opinion that “the Qur’an, while accentuating the humanity of Jesus more forcefully than does Christianity, nevertheless also alludes to the ‘union’ of Jesus and the Word in a more explicit manner than can be found in the Church’s explicit texts” (*Christianity and Islam: Essays on Ontology and Archetype* [Matheson Trust, 2010], p. 110, fn.).

⁴ *Bezels of Wisdom*, p. 175.

Shah-Kazemi reads: “God purified him in body and exalted him in spirit, /And made of him a symbol of engendering.”⁵ This translation is intriguing because “a symbol of engendering” could be taken as a coded reference to the name “Son”, which is indeed a symbol of the relation of begetting.

Of course, Ibn ‘Arabi also cites the statement of the Qur’an, “*They are concealers [unbelievers] who say that God is the Messiah, son of Mary*”.⁶ But then, a Christian too can agree with that statement, for in Christian terms the Son of Mary is not “God,” a word that is usually reserved for the Trinity or the Father; He is specifically God the Son (the Second Person of the Trinity). Jesus is not the Incarnation of “God,” therefore, but specifically the incarnation of God’s Son, or Self-knowledge. This in turn means that by loving Jesus we human creatures may enter into that relationship God has with Himself, in Himself, through the Holy Spirit. Similarly, when Islam insists of Allah that “*He, God, is One, God the Self-Subsistent. He neither begets, nor is He begotten,*” Christianity can in a sense agree with this statement, since it is not God as such but the *Father* who begets (and He does so, of course, spiritually, not in any carnal sense). We will return to these points in our conclusion.

Intriguingly, Ibn ‘Arabi distinguishes those Christians who confuse divinity with the human form (son of Mary) from those others—of whom he appears to approve—who assert that the divine identity is rather “*the subject in the human form*” [my emphasis]. “Thus he is [at once] the Word of God, the Spirit of God, and the slave of God, and such a [triple] manifestation in sensible form belongs to no other.” He describes Jesus as the Universal Seal of Sanctity, the paradigm of holiness, just as Muhammad is the Seal of Prophecy.

“Every other man is attributed to his formal father, not to the one who blows His Spirit into human form... All creatures are indeed words of God, which are inexhaustible, stemming as they do from [the command] *Be*, which is the Word of God. Now, can the Word be attributed to God as He is in Himself, so that its nature may never be known, or can God descend to the form of him who says *Be* [i.e. the form of a human being], so that the word *Be* may be said to be the reality of the form to which He descends

⁵ Reza Shah-Kazemi, at www.ibn'Arabisociety.org/rezashah.html: “Jesus in the Qur’an: An Akbari Perspective”. Another interesting study of Ibn ‘Arabi’s views on Jesus see Saoud Hakim, “The Spirit and the Son of the Spirit” online at www.ibn'Arabisociety.org/articles/spirit.html.

⁶ *Ibn Al ‘Arabi: The Bezels of Wisdom*, p. 177.

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