

## **THE QUR'ANIC JESUS** **Isa al-Masih in the Qur'an**

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### **Abstract**

*This article examines the theological polemics between Islam and Christianity focusing on the prophetic attribution of Isa al-Masih in Islamic tradition. It takes a close look at the Qur'anic construction upon the Prophet Isa al-Masih as a human being who served as a messenger of God, while briefly comparing the Islamic construction to the Christian tradition projecting Isa-al-Masih as the son of God. Rather than emphasising differences between the two traditions, this article, through the Qur'anic concept *kalimatun sawa'* (the shared principle or meeting point), sheds a new light on a shared belief between Islam and Christian traditions. Both Islam and Christianity believe that Isa al-Masih is the saviour for humanity, the liberator for the weak and the oppressed. The Qur'an maintains Isa al-Masih as one of the *ulul azmi* meaning that the prophets who successfully liberated his people.*

*[Artikel ini menjelaskan polemik antara Islam dan Kristen terkait tokoh Nabi Isa al-Masih atau Yesus dalam tradisi Kristen. Dalam Kristen, Yesus atau Isa al-Masih dipercaya sebagai anak Tuhan, Islam justru memandangnya sebagai anak manusia, pesuruh Tuhan atau seorang nabi dan rasul. Artikel ini tidak bermaksud menyelesaikan perdebatan tersebut, melainkan lewat kajian tematik dengan mengkaji berbagai surat dalam al-Qur'an, artikel ini ingin menunjukkan bahwa meskipun terjadi perbedaan pandangan secara teologis tentang Isa al-Masih antara tradisi Islam dan Kristen tidak dapat dihindari, namun titik temu antara keduanya sangat kuat dan itulah yang disebut Qur'an sebagai kalimatun sama' yang membuat keduanya lebih menekankan pada kedamaian daripada konflik. Isa al-Masih dipandang oleh Kristen dan Islam sebagai tokoh terhormat dan memiliki misi profetik membebaskan manusia yang lemah dan tertindas. Sehingga dalam tradisi Islam, Isa al-Masih tergolong sebagai nabi ulul azmi atau sang pembebas.]*

**Keywords:** *Isa al-Masih, Islam, Meeting Point*

## Introduction

The theological polemics between Islam and Christianity has been centred on the figure of Isa al-Masih (the saviour), an important prophet in Islamic tradition and, Jesus as the son of God in Christianity. The polemics between these two-largest religious traditions have nurtured a theological debates and tensions between their believers. As a contemporary case for instance, the biggest Indonesian-based Islamic newspaper *Republika* in 2011 reported the destruction of a billboard saying “Jesus: A Prophet of Islam” by an Australian-based Muslim organisation. In the beginning, the billboard aims at encouraging Christians and Muslims to find meeting points by raising awareness that Muslims believe in Jesus. However, for the perpetrators of the destruction, the billboard was seen as an open attack towards the Christians. Responding to the attack, Bishop Porteus argues that Jesus is more than a prophet. He is the son of God. He is God and the saviour of mankind.<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile, for Muslims, Jesus was a human being,

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<sup>1</sup> “Uskup Australia tak rela Isa disebut Nabi,” *Republika*, June 3, 2011.

although he has been attributed as a Muslim prophet. This contemporary tension between Islam and Christianity exemplifies the long polemics between these two largest religious traditions. As Leirvik argues, the theological question of Jesus is one of sensitive polemics separating Islam and Christianity that has resorted a barrier for cross-religious dialogue.<sup>2</sup>

According to Seyyed Hossein Nasr, the issue of Isa al-Masih is one of seven theological issues often contributing to the tension and conflict between Christianity and Islam. These seven issues has been essential problems separating Islam and Christianity which include, *first*, on the origin of the nature of God; *second*, the finality of religion; *third*, the meaning and status of sacred scripture; *fourth*, the notion of sacredness; *fifth*, the circumstances of sacredness; *sixth*, on the lives of Jesus; *seventh*, on Christian's and Muslim's responses towards modernism and post modernism.<sup>3</sup>

Within Islamic tradition, theological polemics on prophethood do arise and often incites major casualties, such as religious violence and communal conflict. Indonesian Muslim record an increasing number of attacks against non-orthodox Muslim communities, such as the Syiah minority and the Qadian Ahmadiyya community. For the majority of Muslims, the Prophet Muhammad is the seal of prophethood (*kebatm al an-biyā*). As for *Jamaah Ahmadiyah Qadian*, the Prophet Muhammad is not the last prophet. The prophets after him do exist; one of them is Mirza Ghulam Ahmad.<sup>4</sup>

Theological construction is surely the heart of religious dialogues and, otherwise, often reserves as a barrier for the dialogue. History of religion records that, theological differences incite communal violence

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<sup>2</sup> Oddbjorn Leirvik, *Lorong Baru Dialog Kristen Islam*, trans. Ali Nur Zaman (Yogyakarta: Fajar Pustaka, 2007), p. 1.

<sup>3</sup> Seyyed Hossein Nasr, "A Few Comments on Theological Issues in the Islamic-Christian Dialogue" Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad and Z. Wadi Haddad (eds.), *Christian-Muslim Encounters* (Florida: University Press of Florida, 1995), pp. 457-466.

<sup>4</sup> Iskandar Zulkarnain, *Gerakan Ahmadiyah di Indonesia* (Yogyakarta: LKiS, 2006), p. 102-104.

and conflict in the name of God. The theological construction separating Islam and Christianity on the figure of Jesus has incited wars on behalf of God. To use the concept of “text” in the study of hermeneutics, Isa al-Masih represents an “open text”, thus it is likely that every translator expresses multiple views and also similarities. This paper seeks to extend the Islamic construction on Isa Al-Masih or the “Muslim Jesus”<sup>5</sup> as Tarif Khalidi argues by looking at his roles as the liberator of his community; a shared belief between Islam and Christianity on the Muslim Jesus.

### Qur'anic Genealogy of Isa al-Masih

The Qur'an maintains Isa al-Masih as a human being as that is generally born by and derived from human beings as well. However, the Qur'an also maintains a peculiar attribution upon Isa al-Masih; that he has no biological father. It mentions “he was born of a woman that “no man has touched me” (Ali Imran [3]: 47). According to this Qur'anic verse, Maryam who never had any intersexual intercourse with men is the mother of Isa al-Masih. The Qur'an calls Isa al-Masih as *ibn Maryam* (the son of Maryam) which appears in twenty-three times throughout the Qur'an.<sup>6</sup> This mentioning also implies that Isa al-Masih had no biological father. Thus, as also Christian traditions says, Maryam the Qur'an spells Maryam, the mother of Jesus, as a virgin mother. The Qur'an further explores that “Thus Allah creates what He wills. When He was about to set a plan, He simply said: “Be,” then so be it” (Ali Imran [3]: 47). Emphasising on the God's rule and power as the ultimate cause, the Qur'an also informs an explanation on the birth of Isa al-Masih (Ali Imran [3]: 59).

The Qur'an records that Maryam is a descendant of Imran, an important Muslim family recorded to name the third chapter (*sura*) of the Qur'an, *sura* Ali Imran (the family of Imran). The Qur'an

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<sup>5</sup> Tarif Khalidi, *The Muslim Jesus*, trans. Iyoh S. Muniroh & Qomaruddin SF (Jakarta: Porch, 2003).

<sup>6</sup> Syaumi Abu Khalil, *Atlas al-Qur'an*, trans. M. Abdul Ghoffar (Jakarta: Almahira, 2006), p. 129.

mentions orderly the name Imran along with important prophets; Adam, Nuh, the family of Ibrahim (*ali Ibrahim*) and of Imran (Ali Imran [3]: 33). Adam was conceived as the first person created by Allah with His power (without the father-mother). Noah was the Prophet known for having a long lifetime and the longest preaching time than other Prophets, and the family of Ibrahim, particularly the prophet Isaac, the family who later bears many Prophets, including the Prophet Musa or Moses. As for the family of Imran, the Qur'an records Maryam, the mother of Jesus, as one of descendants of this family. Apart from this biological relatedness which the prophetic tradition (*sunna*) mentions as *al-Anbiyā'u ikhwatun li'allāti ummahātubum syattā wab nuhum wāḥid* (one another as one lineage; all the Prophets are close relatives), these four-mentioned names shared the same spiritual essence and theological doctrine of *tawḥid* (monotheism).

Nevertheless, it is imperative to closely examine the name Imran in the Qur'an. The Qur'an records the name Imran as the father of Moses which was related to Aaron. This genealogical trace reaches as Musa ibn Imran, Imran ibn Izhar, Kohath ibn Izhar, Kohath ibn Levi, Levi ibn Ya'qub, Ya'qub ibn Isaac, Isaac ibn Abraham. The Qur'an also records a different Imran. This latter is the father of Maryam, the mother of Isa al-Masih; thus she was known as Maryam binta Imran (Maryam the daughter of Imran).<sup>7</sup> These two Imrans lived in different times. The Christian tradition says that the timespan distancing the first and the second Imran reaches to 1500 years while others predict 1800 years-timespan.<sup>8</sup>

Nevertheless, the Qur'an and *hadith* do not provide a clear information about the two Imrans. According to an English translator of the Qur'an, Yusuf Ali, Imran married to Hanah binti Faqudz, the mother

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<sup>7</sup> Ibn Kathir, *Tafsir Ibn Kathir: A Bridge*, Vol. 2 (Riyadh: Maktaba Dar-us-Salam, 2003), p. 23.

<sup>8</sup> Ali Audah, *Nama dan Kata dalam al-Qur'an* (Bogor: Litera AntarNusa, 2011), p. 259-260.

of Maryam, and was a respected person known as one of important of Israelite priests.<sup>9</sup> Imran died just before Maryam was born.<sup>10</sup> Being an orphan, the Qur'an records that her uncle, the prophet Zakaria, the father of the prophet Yahya, looked after Maryam (Ali Imran [3]: 37).<sup>11</sup>

### *The Mother*

Maryam is the only woman mentioned by name in the Qur'an. The names of other women, simply called symbolic, such as *Umm* Moses, *Imra'atu* Imran, *Imra'atu* 'Aziz, *Imra'atu* Pharaoh, Sister of Aaron, and others. Her name often appears in the Qur'an than in the Biblical New Testament. In the Qur'an, the word Maryam appears 34 times. It is most widely mentioned in the QS. al-Ma'idah [5], as many as ten times, then QS. Ali Imran as many as seven. In the Qur'anic *sura* Maryam itself, this word is just mentioned three times.<sup>12</sup> According to Jane Smith and I Yvone Y. Haddad, there are 70 verses which refer to Maryam signifying the centrality of Maryam in Islamic tradition.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, some important Muslim scholars, such as the 14<sup>th</sup> century *ulama*, Ibn Hajar and the 13<sup>th</sup> century theologian al-Qurtuby, claimed that Maryam -and five other women; Eve, Sarah, *ummi* Moses, Hajar, and 'Assia- were all prophetess.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Abdullah Yusuf Ali, *Qur'an Terjemah dan Tafsirnya*, trans. Ali Audah (Jakarta: Pustaka Firdaus, 1993), p. 131.

<sup>10</sup> Barbara Freyer Stowasser, *Reinterpretasi Gender*, trans. H.M. Mochtar Zoerni (Jakarta: Pustaka Hidayah, 2001), p. 186.

<sup>11</sup> Abdullah Yusuf Ali, *Qur'an Terjemah*..., p. 131; Ali Audah, *Nama dan Kata*..., p. 260; Ibn Kathir, *Ibn Kathir*..., p. 23. According to Nurcholish Madjid, Maryam's mother is Elizabeth, which means someone whose heart is affirmed by God. Nurcholish Madjid, "Keluarga Imran, Siti Maryam dan Isa al-Masih," Komaruddin Hidayat & Ahmad Gaus AF (eds.), *Melintasi Batas Agama* (Jakarta: Paramadina, 1998), p. 391.

<sup>12</sup> Muhammad Fu'ad Abdul Baqi, *al-Mu'jam al-Mufabras li Alfadzil Qur'an* (Bairut: Darul Fikr, 1978), p. 665.

<sup>13</sup> Jane I Smith & Yvone Y Haddad, "The Virgin Mary in Islamic Tradition and Commentary", *The Muslim World*, Vol. 79, No. 3-4, 1989, p. 162.

<sup>14</sup> Muhammad al-Habasy, *al-Mar'ab bainas Syari'ah wal Hayab* (Damascus: Darut Tajdid, 2002), p. 152-153.

Like Isa al-Masih, the presence of Maryam in the family of Imran and the society of Bani Israel was peculiar. Based on the understanding of the QS. Ali Imran [3]: 35, Quraish Shihab explained that the wife of Imran, Hanah was convinced her future born-baby was a boy. She made a promise to submit his future-baby for the sake of religion at the Baitul Maqdis in Jerusalem. In the patriarchal family, male counterpart rather than female is responsible in affairs related to sanctity and religious activities.<sup>15</sup>

Nevertheless, Hanah was disappointed knowing that he delivered a female baby, later named Maryam. She prayed for her daughter saying, “*I ask Your protection for her and her descendants from the accursed demonic disorder.*” *Du’ā kadu’a Umm ul innaby*.<sup>16</sup> The *hadith* further report the sanctity of Maryam as she was pure, untouched by the devil, and God appointed as a model for female piety and holiness. The *hadith* mentions “*every son of Adam is born touched by devil at the time of his birth except Maryam and her son*” and another *hadith*, narrated by Hisham bin Hakim also says, “*the best women in the world are four: Maryam ibn Imran, Asiya wife of Pharaoh, Khadijah daughter of Khumailid, and Fatimah daughter of Muhammad.*”<sup>17</sup> The Qur’an itself also rules that boys are not like girls (QS. 3: 36), but that does not mean that women are not equal or lower to men. Thus, Maryam is often attributed as *abidah* and *khadimah*, the servant of God without resorts.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> M. Quraish Shihab, *Tafsir Al-Misbah*, Vol. 2 (Jakarta: Lentera Hati, 2000). p. 72-73. It enough represents how strong the culture of patriarchy in society at that time until Muhammad came. When someone gave birth to a daughter, she looks so sad and hopeless to complete her promise. This tragedy reminds us of Khadijah, wife of Muhammad and to Arabic women who experienced the same thing at that time; being shy to have a daughter or having a daughter is considered a disgrace. Tariq Ramadhan, *Muhammad Rasul Zaman Kita*, trans. R. Cecep Lukman Yasin (Jakarta: Serambi, 2007), p. 76.

<sup>16</sup> Prayer of a mother is like the prayer of the Prophet.

<sup>17</sup> Ahmad Syauqi Ibrahim, *Ensiklopedia Mukjizat Ilmiah Hadis Nabi*, trans. A. Zaini Anshori, Vol. 1 (Bandung: Sigma Publishing, 2010), p. 203-205.

<sup>18</sup> Barbara Freyer Stowasser, *Reinterpretasi Gender*..., p. 185.

Contending the patriarchal principle, Hannah sent Maryam to the most holy site in Jerusalem, the Baitul Maqdis. Maryam dedicated herself as “the servant of the Baitul Maqdis” and live in a small compartment in the sanctuary.<sup>19</sup> She worshipped days and nights, and her patience and devotedness was popular among the Israelites. She was well-known as a pure lady who consistently keeping her pure heart, serving God (QS. Al-Anbiya’ [21]: 91 and at-Tahrim [66]: 12). In Islamic tradition, mainly Sufism, Maryam has been deemed as the outmost example of women piety.<sup>20</sup>

### *Qur'anic Attributes*

The Qur’an records Maryam through several verses. In verses that God revealed during the Prophet Muhammad Meccan period (*makkiyah*), Maryam and her son Isa al-Masih are defined as the absolute proof for the power of God (al-Mu’minun [23]: 50 and al-Anbiya’ [21]: 91). In verses revealed during the Prophet Medina period (*madaniyya*), the Qur’an clearly appoints Maryam as women with purity who never once committing sinful acts (Ali Imran: 42). Another Qur’anic verse tells that Maryam is indeed “queen of truth” (*siddiqoh*) (Ali Imran: 75). The Qur’an also mentions Maryam as *al-qānitīn* attributing her devotedness in serving God. With these special attributions, some Muslim scholars further argue that Maryam is indeed a Prophetess.

### *Maryam's Pregnancy*

The Qur’an records the story of Maryam’s pregnancy in numerous verses (Maryam [19]: 16-22; al-Anbiya’ [21]: 91; Ali Imran [3]: 45; at-Tahrim [66]: 12). The Qur’an tells that Maryam, at her 13-15 years-old,<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> This story is as a description that women not only can be *takmir*, but even can live in a specific place in mosque. Therefore, it is wrong if women cannot go to mosque even to pray together.

<sup>20</sup> Abu Abdurrahman al-Sulami, *Sufi-sufi Wanita: Tradisi yang Tervadari*, trans. Ahsin Mohammad (Bandung: Pustaka Hidayah, 2004).

<sup>21</sup> Ahmad Syaqui Ibrahim, *Ensiklopedia Mukjizat*..., p. 209.

became miraculously pregnant during her religious seclusion in the east.<sup>22</sup> The story goes that the Angle Gabriel who introduced himself as Ruhana visited Maryam during her religious seclusion in Nazareth (Galilee), about 65 miles north of Jerusalem.<sup>23</sup> Ruhana informed that she was pregnant and instructed Maryam to name his future son as Isa al-Masih *ibn* Maryam (QS. Ali Imran: 45).

Knowing her miraculous pregnancy, Maryam felt depressed,<sup>24</sup> but Ruhana promised to help her during the pregnancy and the birth of the baby (Maryam: 24). According to Islamic tradition, Maryam experienced her pregnancy for 9 months (Maryam [19]: 23-26),<sup>25</sup> but the Qur'an does not inform the exact date for the birth of Isa al-Masih, while Christianity commemorates Isa al-Masih's birthday every 25<sup>th</sup> of December. According to al-Biqā'i—as Quraish Shihab quotes—the angle's assistance forms as a miracle that Maryam performed. It is said that Isa al-Masih was born during the winter, while dates only bear fruit in summer. However, even in winter season, the dates grew their fruit and the fruit helped Maryam, who was giving a birth to her baby. Al-Biqā'i continues, there was a harmony between the tree of dates and the birth event. The tree cannot bear fruit unless after the process of fertilization. But what Maryam showed was precisely the opposite. The fruit fell without fertilization.<sup>26</sup>

With the assistance of Gabriel or Ruhana, Maryam raised her child alone and decided to go back to her family as Isa al-Masih at his forty days (QS. Maryam: 27). As returning home, the Israelites Jews accused Maryam of committing adultery, as recorded in the Qur'an

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<sup>22</sup> Ibn Kathir, *Tafsir Ibn Kathir*, Vol. 3..., p. 154; M. Quraish Shihab, *Tafsir al-Mishbab*, Vol. 8..., p. 164.

<sup>23</sup> Abdullah Yusuf Ali, *Qur'an Terjemah...*, p. 770.

<sup>24</sup> Ahmad Syauqi Ibrahim, *Ensiklopedia Mukjizat...*, p. 211.

<sup>25</sup> According to another opinion, Maryam was pregnant and gave birth in a short time, not as commonly. This opinion is based on the words of Ibn Abbas who stated that when she conceived and gave birth directly and in accordance with the verse which uses *fa* at the beginning of each section 22, 23, and 24 of QS. Maryam showing that it happened very quickly. Ahmad Syauqi Ibrahim, *Ensiklopedia Mukjizat...*, p. 209.

<sup>26</sup> M. Quraish Shihab, *Tafsir Al-Mishbab*, Vol. 8..., p. 169.

(Maryam: 27-28; an-Nisa' [4]: 156). The Jews pointed as Yusuf an-Najjar as the father of her son<sup>27</sup> to which the Qur'an responded the accusation as the greatest lie (*buhṭānan' adẓīma*).<sup>28</sup> The Qur'an later records that the baby Isa al-Masih defended his mother as he was miraculously capable of speaking. The Qur'an continues that "I [Isa] am the servant of God; He gave the book (the Bible) and made me a Prophet," "and made me a blessed wherever I am, and he ordered me (to perform) the prayer and (pay) *ẓakat* as long as I live", "and dutiful to my mother, and He does not make me a snob nor wretched." "and Peace be upon me, on the day I was born, the day I die and the day I shall be raised alive!", "That is Isa, son of Maryam, who said the right words, they are arguing about the truth." "it is not worthy for God to have a son, The holy Him. when He has set something, He just said: "Be, then so be it." "Verily Allah is my Lord and your Lord, so worship Him by you all. This is the straight path." (Maryam: 30-36)

The above Qur'anic verses clearly tell that Isa al-Masih is the son of Maryam who was a miraculously pregnant mother. This verdicts surely problematizes the association of Isa al-Masih as the son of God, a fundamental polemic separating Islam and Christianity. Thus, even though both Christianity and Islam accept the doctrine of the virgin Maryam/Mary, these traditions differ in judging the attribution of Isa al-Masih. For Islamic tradition, Isa al-Masih is mentioned 24 times in the Qur'an and is the son of Maryam. He is an ordinary person,<sup>29</sup> but bestowed with miracles. Isa al-Masih is indeed the Prophet of Islam (Maryam [19]: 30) and a messenger (*rasul*) (Ali Imran [3]: 45).

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<sup>27</sup> Barbara Freyer Stowasser, *Reinterpretasi Gender*..., p. 190-1.

<sup>28</sup> Untruth accusation was not only contradicted by the Qur'an, but also by Luke and Matthew. In Luke 3: 23 says: ... and so it was thought, he is Joseph, the son of Eli. Because, according to Matthew 1: 1-25 that the birth of Jesus Christ at the time Maryam was betrothed to Joseph, in fact she was pregnant from the *Rob Kudus*, before they lived as husband and wife.

<sup>29</sup> Hans Kung et.al., *Christianity and the World Religions* (New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1986), p. 98-9; Nurcholish Madjid, *Pintu-Pintu Menuju Tuhan* (Jakarta: Paramadina, 1995), p. 220.

His mother Maryam is recognised as an extraordinary women (QS. Ali Imran [3]: 42), but not the mother of god as the doctrine of Christianity believes.<sup>30</sup>

### *The Son of Maryam*

The Qur'an mentions Isa either as the *ibn Maryam* (the son of Maryam or al-Masih (the saviour). The name Isa al-Masih appears eleven times in the Qur'an. According to the Qur'an exegete Thabathaba'i, al-Masih is *mu'arrab*, the Arabic word of "*masyih*", a word that is also found in the Old Testament and the New Testament. Isa is called al-Masih, according to Thabathaba'i because he is blessed with oil as mentioned in the Qur'an (Maryam [19]: 30-31).<sup>31</sup> The attribution of al-Masih forms as the distinguished interpretation between Islam and Christianity. The Qur'an say that al-Masih, an attribute associated to the figure of Isa, is because of the miraculous pregnancy of his mother Maryam. He is a son without a father (Ali Imran [3]: 45 and An-Nisa' [4]: 171).<sup>32</sup> As Raghīb al-Isfahani further explains, al-Masih refers to the role of Isa as a messenger who received revelation.<sup>33</sup>

As the above discussion, Isa al-Masih was capable of performing miracle since his baby-age. As explaining to the Jews who questioned his identity, the baby Isa al-Masih said that he is indeed the servant of God (*'abd Allah*) and a prophet (*nabiy*) (Maryam: 30). *'Abd Allah* literally means the servant of Allah and refers to a pious creature, regardless human and non-human being, such as angels and demons. In addition as to a human being, the baby Isa is indeed a pure boy (*ghulāman zakīyyā*) (Maryam: 19) and a prophet who receive revelation (al-Kahf [18]: 110).

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<sup>30</sup> Mohammed Arkoun, *Berbagai Pembacaan al-Qur'an*, trans. Machasin (Jakarta: INIS, 1997), p. 78-9.

<sup>31</sup> Muhammad Husain Tabataba'i, *al-Miṣṣan fi Tafsir al-Qur'an*, Vol. III (Beirut: Mu'assasah lil-'Alam al-Matbu'at, 1991), p. 224-225.

<sup>32</sup> Saleh 'Udhaimah, *al-Mustalabat Qur'aniyyah* (Beirut: Darun Nasr, tt.), p. 363.

<sup>33</sup> Ar-Raghīb al-Isfahani, *al-Mufradat fi al-Gharib al-Qur'an* (Egypt: Mustafā al-Bābī al-Halabī wa Auladuhu, 1961), p. 439-440.

Furthermore, among the prophets of Islam, Isa al-Masih enjoyed a special status as one of the high-rank prophet (*ulul 'Azmi*) which includes four other prophets: Nuh, Ibrahim, Musa, the last Prophet Muhammad.<sup>34</sup> Islamic tradition rules that *ulul 'azmi* are the prophets of Islam who demonstrated sincerity, patience, and determination. The *ulul 'azmi* were bound with a firm covenant (*mitsāqan ghalidza*).<sup>35</sup> Thabathaba'i further explains that the Qur'an attributes *ulul 'Azmi* is *shāhibu shar'in wa kitābin* (the founder of principles of religion and holy books) (QS. asy-Syu'ara [42]: 13, al-A'la [87]: 19 and al-Maidah [5]: 51).<sup>36</sup> These five *ulul 'Azmi* has a special status before God because they were the carrier of God's laws and holy scriptures. Importantly, the Qur'an also mentions Isa al-Masih as the prophet who teaches monotheism (Al-Maidah [5]: 75; An-Nisa' [4]: 171). In one way or another, the Qur'an also refutes the association of Isa as the son of God (QS. al-Ma'idah: 72).

### The Qur'anic Polemics

Isa Al-Masih is an Israelite who live lived in the area currently known as Palestine during the reign of the Roman Emperor August and Tiberius.<sup>37</sup> The Qur'an tells that Isa is the prophet of the Israelite (Ali Imran [3]: 49; al-Ma'idah [5]: 72 and 110; as-Shaff [61]: 6) who called for monotheism among the people of the book (*'abl al-kitāb*) (al-Nisa' [4]: 171). The Qur'an also mentions the prophethood of Isa al-Masih through miracle-making stories (Ali Imran [3]: 49; al-Ma'idah [5]: 110).

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<sup>34</sup> Muhammad Husain Tabataba'i, *al-Miẓān fi Tafsīr*..., p. 148-149; Sahabuddin et.al., *Ensiklopedia al-Qur'an*..., p. 1032-1033.

<sup>35</sup> With other Prophets (QS. Al-Ahzab [33]: 7) or those who were given the Book, God only uses the word *watsaqa*, without predicate *ghalidza* (QS. Ali Imran [3]: 186. Qur'an early use of the term *mitsaqan ghalidza* 3 times. In addition to the QS. al-Ahzab, contained in QS. an-Nisa' [4]: 21 and 154. Verse 21 deals with the agreement between married couples and verse 154 related to the agreement of the Jews.

<sup>36</sup> Muhammad Husain Tabataba'i, *al-Miẓān fi Tafsīr*..., p. 148-149.

<sup>37</sup> Ziaul Haque, *Wahyu dan Revolusi*, trans. E. Setiyawati al-Khattab (Yogyakarta: LKiS, 2000), p. 196; Ali Audah, *Nama dan Kata*..., p. 275.

Isa al-Masih received a collection of revelation so-called *injil* or the bible, thus the Qur'an spells his Christian followers as the people of the Bible ('*abl al-'injil*) (QS. Al-Ma'idah [5]: 47).

The *Injil* or Bible is essential in Isa al-Masih's principle on monotheistic religion. The Qur'an records the term '*injil*' in twelve verses (Ali Imran [3]: 3, 48, and 65; al-Ma'idah [5]: 46, 47, 66, 68; 110, al-Araf [7]: 157; at-Tawbah [9]: 111; al-Fath [48]: 29; al-Hadid [57]: 27). The verses explain four important points. *First*, the Bible and the Torah are revelation of God. They are holy books in which principles and laws of religion are found. These two books are exclusively for the Cristian and the Jews.<sup>38</sup>

*Second*, God revealed his revelation to the prophet Moses through the Torah and to Isa al-Masih through the *Injil*. These two books are exclusively for the Israelites. The Qur'an also tells the Bible intends to re-establish principles of monotheism contained in the Torah which was revealed earlier than the Bible (al-Ma'idah [5]: 46).<sup>39</sup> Both holy scriptures contain principles of monotheism and wisdoms. Importantly, the Qur'an also informs that the Torah and the Bible also contains information about the future Prophet Muhammad who would be the seal of the prophethood (Al-Araf [7]: 157; al-Fath [48]: 29).<sup>40</sup> This latter verdict clearly forms as the polemic between Islam, Christianity and Judaism.

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<sup>38</sup> Muhammad Husain Tabataba'i, *al-Mizan fi Tafsir*..., p. 9.

<sup>39</sup> As is known from history, Christianity was born in the Jewish religion. I.H. Enklaar, *Sejarah Gereja Ringkas* (Jakarta: BPK Gunung Mulia, 1966), p. 176. Even the nation and the Jewish religion can be referred to as "biological mother" of Christianity. Isa, or Jesus himself was born as a Jew. The Bible contains several provisions that are not *nasakh* from the Torah, the Christians did not fully follow the content of the teachings of the Torah. This is what makes the relationship between Jewish and Christians showed two patterns, continuity and discontinuity. Continuity because he was the son of Jewish proclaimed or promised to free the Jewish people from a variety of oppression and murder. Maybe that's why, in the Qur'an, Moses and Jesus, the Torah and the Bible as well as Jews and Christians are almost always mentioned together. While on the other hand it is said discontinuity, because many of the teachings, especially law and divinity no longer in line with the Torah. E.W.B. "Christianity," *The New Encyclopedia Britannica*, Vol. IV (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1979), p. 466.

<sup>40</sup> Muhammad Husain Tabataba'i, *al-Mizan fi Tafsir*..., p. 229-285.

*Third*, the Qur'an also rules that Muslim should show their respect the scripture of Bible and the Torah; both are indeed revelation of the same God (al-Ma'idah [5]: 66 and 68). Like the Qur'an, the Bible and the Torah teach monotheism and contain an universal teaching which is also found in the Qur'an. God further promises the believer of these monotheistic religions has equal rights to enjoy the heaven.<sup>41</sup> And *fourth*, the Qur'an also dictates that both the Torah and the Bible are holy scriptures containing truth and instructs their believers practice the God's rules mentioned in these two scriptures (al-Ma'idah [5]: 47 and QS. al-Hadid [57]: 27). Like the Torah, the Bible compromises of religious regulations and laws to which both the Jews and the Christians should carry out otherwise they would fall into the state of *fasiq* (violation of God's law).<sup>42</sup>

To summarise the principle of monotheism, the Qur'an tells that Isa al-Masih is the son of Maryam -or Mary in Christian tradition. He is a prophet who calls for monotheism (*tauhīd*) (QS. az-Zukhruf [43]: 62-64; al-Ma'idah: 116). The Qur'an also warns the '*ahl al-kitāb*' to establish the principle of *tauhīd* and to tell the truth (an-Nisa': 171) and Isa al-Masih is indeed not the son of God, but the son of Maryam (al-Ma'idah: 17 and 72). The above principle is surely a fundamental principle separating two monotheistic religions: Islam and Christianity, despite both share many similarities with regards to Isa al-Masih.

Another polemic involving Christianity and Islam is particularly related to the end of life of Isa al-Masih. The Qur'an tells Isa al-Masih is neither crucified nor dead.

*“and because of their disbelief (to Isa) and their accusations against Mary with a vicious slander (zīna). And because of their saying “Surely we have killed the Messiah, Isa son of Maryam, the Messenger of God,” but they did not kill him and not (also) crucified him, but (they killed) someone that was likened to Isa for them.*

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<sup>41</sup> QS. at-Tawbah [9]: 111.

<sup>42</sup> Richard E. Rubenstein, *Kala Yesus menjadi Tuhan*, trans. Hasto Rosariyanto (Jakarta: Porch, 2006); Clayton Sullivan, *Selamatkan Yesus dari Orang-Orang Kristen*, trans. M. Hasyim (Jakarta: Porch, 2005).

*Indeed those who were in dispute about the (murder) of 'Isa, is really in doubt about the one they killed. They had no belief about who had been killed, but only following a mere allegation, they do not (also) believe that the one they killed was Isa."* (an-Nisa' [4] 156-157):

The Qur'an further explains that Isa al-Masih was ascended to heaven:

*"O Isa, indeed I will make you die and pull you to the side of Me and clean you from those who disbelieve and make those who follow you above those who disbelieve until the Day of Resurrection"* (Ali Imran [3]: 55).

An Indonesia Qur'anic exegete Quraish Shihab explains that the purpose of the "Ascension of the Messiah" is that God will help whoever who fights for the sake of goodness, truth, and justice.<sup>43</sup> Another explanation says that Isa al-Masih ascended to heaven when he as 33 years of age.

## Conclusion

This article has provided an insight on two major figure in two religious traditions: Islam and Christianity. The Qur'anic construction of Maryam, the mother of Jesus or Isa al-Masih in Islamic tradition, has given a clue the centrality of women in these two biggest religious traditions. Importantly, this article also offers the Qur'anic perspective with regards to the founder of Christianity, Isa al-Masih, and religious polemics involving Christianity and Islam. Despite sharing the same important figure, both religious traditions differ in some fundamental points in interpreting the principle of monotheism. The Islamic tradition does confirm that Jesus is indeed Isa al-Masih, an important prophet in the history of Islam who received revelation, the Bible or the *Injil* in Islamic tradition. Nevertheless, both traditions develop different interpretation on the limits of monotheism. Islam puts into question the Christians' belief that Jesus is the son of god and the crucifixion of Jesus. The Qur'an offers another interpretation that Isa al-Masih was ascended to heaven.

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<sup>43</sup> Quraish Shihab, *Tafsir al-Misbah...*, p. 98-99.

Despite these fundamental differences, the Qur'an clearly emphasises the centrality of Jesus in the history of Islam and further guarantees the followers of these monotheistic religions of entering heaven. This later principle serves as one of important pillars for dialog between Islam and Christianity.

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