

# Jesus Christ in Rumi's Poetry and Parables

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*You Are Already That; original art, Sessuko Yoshida*



Christians and Muslims have much in common, not only because we all are humans, not only because both Christianity and Islam originated in the Middle East and trace their ancestry back to Abraham, but also because Jesus Christ is a holy figure in Islam. This is rarely known to the Western public and is often overlooked by the mass media. It is thus saddening to see that some extremist and violent events of recent years and the mass media's thirst for polarization and confrontation have portrayed an anti-Christian Islamic world against the Christian Western world. Such a polarization does not really exist in either Christianity or Islam; it is portrayed only to serve certain political and misguided doctrinal purposes. Perhaps a very useful portal of entry to understand the sacred position of Jesus Christ in Islam is Mawlânâ ("Master") Jalâluddîn Rumi (1207-1273), the renowned Persian and Sufi poet of the thirteenth century and currently one of the most popular poets in North America and other English speaking countries. As a person born and raised in Iran (Rumi's cultural land) I have been fascinated with Rumi's poetry for nearly three decades, and am

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privileged to share with you some facets of Jesus Christ in Rumi's book of poetic parables to which he himself gave the title of "Rhymed Couplets on Spiritual Matters" (*Masnawi Ma'nawi*).

Isâ Masih, as he is called in Arabic, literally means "Jesus the Messiah". Muslims believe in the "virgin birth" of Jesus Christ. According to the Qur'an (15: 29; 38: 72), the Divine (*Allah*) breathed his spirit into Adam when he created humanity. Sufis extend this quality to the virgin birth of Jesus through Mary (*Mariyam* in Arabic, which is also the title of the chapter 19 in the Qur'an) so that Jesus was born without an earthly father. This is consistent with the Islamic epithet of Jesus as the Divine Spirit (*Ruh Allah*) among the prophets (in a similar vein, Abraham is called *Khalil Allah*, the Loyal Friend of God, and Moses *Kalim Allah*, the Interlocutor and Conversant with God). The Divine Spirit or Holy Spirit as a medium between the Divine and the world of creation is called *Ruh al-Qods* in the Quran. Sufis particularly praise the purity and piety of Mary, and emphasize that the same Holy Spirit does wonders with every human who is devoted to the Divine.

In a long poem in the *Masnawi* (Book III, lines 3702-3790), Rumi revisits the virgin birth of Jesus. After referring to the story in the Qur'an (Mary, verses 17-18) where it is said that, in order to give birth to Jesus, the Holy Spirit was sent by God and appeared to Mary as a very good-looking man, and where Mary says, "I seek refuge in God", Rumi then continues:

*The Holy Spirit said to Mary:  
Oh, the exemplar of charity!  
Don't fear me!*

*I am the trusty one sent by the  
Divine.*

*Don't hide yourself from me.  
I am your dignity and honor!  
Don't hide yourself from me,  
I am your comfort and confidant.  
As the Holy Spirit uttered these  
words*

*The rays of pure light sprang  
from his lips*

*And shone upon the stars of the sky.*

*The Holy Spirit continued:*

*Oh Mary, how can you escape  
from my presence to non-existence?*

*I am the king of non-existence  
and I possess all of knowledge.*

*My very foundation and my seat  
is non-existence.*

*What is present before you is only  
an image of me.*

*Oh Mary! Look at me. I am an  
image hard to come by*

*I am the crescent you see up in  
the sky*

*I am the image within your heart.*

*When such image as this one  
settles in your heart*

*Wherever you go, it is within you.*

*This is not the delusion a false  
daylight*

*That appears and disappears  
before the morning.*

*I am the genuine light at dawn  
And the darkness of night never  
gathers around my daylight.*

These are poetic words of an eminent Muslim scholar and mystic about

the Divine qualities that gave Jesus to humanity – a genuine light at dawn and an image that settles in our heart.

Jesus was a healer and his miracles of healing are credited in both the Gospels and in the Qur'an. In the *Masnawi* (lines 298-363), Rumi talks about this aspect of Jesus Christ:

*The house of Jesus was the banquet of the followers of the heart  
Oh, the suffering one! Don't quit his door.  
From all sides people gathered around his house  
Some were blind, some lame, and some insane.  
Each morning they went to his door  
So that their defects could be healed by Jesus' Breath  
Jesus, that man of the good path, would say his prayers  
And would come out, seeing many groups of sick and weak people  
Sitting and waiting at his door of hope.  
Jesus would say: Oh, the stricken ones!  
God has granted your needs and cures.  
The people would then walk, with no pain and trouble,  
Toward the blessings and mercy of the Divine.  
Like the camel whose chains were lifted from their feet  
The people would walk freely and joyfully toward home.  
They all were cured by the prayers of Jesus.*

*And now, you, my friend!  
Have you examined your own defects?  
Have you found a healthy state of being  
In the presence of the masters of the good path?  
Has your lame walking on the spiritual path been cured?  
Has your soul been free from the sufferings and sorrows of this world?*

In this simple and yet rich poem, Rumi points out that sick people were cured by Jesus Christ because they were “the followers of the heart” (*Abl-e Dil* in Persian) sitting lovingly and faithfully at Jesus’ “door of hope”, and thus Jesus’ presence was effective and his prayers were answered by the Divine. Rumi uses these miracles of Jesus symbolically

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to suggest that such is the path for our salvation and freedom (as the camels whose feet are shackled); this is a good path based on the heart, hope, prayers and walking in joy toward God's blessings.

In Sufi literature, especially in Persian poetry, there are frequent references to Jesus' Breath or Messiah's Breath (*Dam-e Isâ* or *Masiha Nafas* in Persian) as having healing power. In the *Masnawi* (Book I, line 528), Rumi says that “a hundred thousand medical prac-

tices of Galen was not a match to one Breath of Jesus.” In the same book (line 794), Rumi says, rather charmingly and in a mystical vein:

*In the fire of the Divine love,  
behold  
I saw a whole universe  
Each particle there possessed Jesus’  
Breath.*

Of course, one cannot deny that Islam’s and Rumi’s attitude toward Jesus Christ was somewhat different from that of the traditional Christianity. Islam considers Jesus as a human blessed by the Divine spirit and sent to humanity as messenger of God to teach the Divine truth; Islam does not subscribe to the Christian terminology of Trinity or Jesus as the only begotten Son of the Father. (The Qur’an, 5: 116, states that Jesus never said that people should consider him or his mother as gods beside God. Elsewhere the Qur’an, 19: 30, quotes Jesus as saying that “I am a devotee and worshipper of God.”)

In many poems, Rumi narrates sayings and stories of Jesus because he wants the readers to be inspired by Jesus’ message. For example, in his references to Jesus and his donkey (which Jesus rode on entering Jerusalem, as we read in the Gospels), Rumi likens the Divine spirit within all humans to Jesus and our material desires to the donkey, thus saying that we should not place the heavy burden of this world upon our spirit (*Masnawi*, Book II, lines 1850-1861). Or in a reference to Jesus’ walking on water (which is again taken from the

Gospels), Rumi likens our walking on the dry land as the outward (exoteric) path of life and Jesus walking on water as the inner (esoteric) journey for humans (*Masnawi*, Book I, lines 570-572).

Whenever I hear or read speeches implying that Muslims are anti-Christ, I remember Rumi’s affectionate poetry and parables about Jesus, and then I desire to hear words of similar spirit told by Christian scholars (who have left behind the Crusader’s false notions about Islam and its prophet) about the spiritual mission of the Qur’an and Prophet Muhammad who called humans to the same one God, as Abraham, Moses and Jesus did before him. In this perspective, Rumi’s poetry, seven centuries later, perhaps has a new significance for our world, uniting us in love rather than dividing the world through hatred and violence.

All Rumi’s poems cited in this article are the author’s translations from the Persian book of Rumi, *Masnawi Mawlânâ Jalâluddîn Muhammad Balkehi* (7 volumes, edited by Muhammad Este’lâmi, Ghalam Publishers, Tehran). For more information about Islamic and Sufi views of Jesus, I recommend the following books:

*Jesus in the Eyes of the Sufis*, by Javad Nurbakhsh (London, 1983).

*The Muslim Jesus: Sayings and Stories in Islamic Literature*, ed. and trans. by Tarif Khalidi (Harvard University Press, 2001).