

Different Stories, Different God: Tawhid and the picture of God in the Qur'an



Big picture: The key question is not only "Is God one?" but "What is the nature of that oneness?" - and stories answer it. The Qur'an retells the Bible's own narratives with the crucial details reshaped or removed, and as the stories change, the portrait of God changes with them. Tawhid itself carries unresolved tensions: a God utterly unlike creation yet described in human terms, and alone eternal yet with eternal speech.

1. Facts alone never reveal a person; to know God we must know His story

Imagine someone speaking confidently about you to others. They know real facts - your name, your family, where you were born and studied. But as you listen, you realise they do not actually know you: not your character, not your values, not what matters most. Facts alone do not reveal a person. For that, you need the story.



The same is true of God. Many people know facts drawn from the Bible - one God, the prophets, Adam, Moses, Jesus - but read those facts without the biblical storyline. A common argument runs: the Shema ("Hear, O Israel: the LORD our God, the LORD is one") proves that all the prophets taught a strictly unitarian view of God; the doctrine of the Trinity was a later corruption; and the Qur'an came to restore what the prophets originally preached - a conviction crystallised in Quran 112: "Say: He is Allah, the One, the Eternal; He begets not, nor is He begotten, and there is none comparable to Him."¹

But detach the Shema from the story in which it stands, and the picture is distorted. So the central claim of this article is this: the Qur'an is not rejecting the Trinity after articulating what the Bible actually teaches. Rather, it presents the biblical figures, themes and narratives in fundamentally different ways - reshaping, reframing and omitting the details on which everything turns. Once the story is changed, the portrait of God changes with it: *Different stories, different God*. This is also why the great biblical themes - atonement, redemption, a Saviour - are absent or even denied in the Qur'an's retelling, the story no longer needs them.

2. In the Qur'an's creation account, image, relationship and redemptive promise all disappear

Begin at the beginning. Genesis does not merely tell us *that* the world was made; it introduces us to *who* God is. God creates everything through His Word; His Spirit hovers over the waters; He says, "Let us make man in our image." Humanity is made in the image of God, for relationship with God. And when Adam and Eve disobey, more than a rule is broken: the relationship between God and humanity is fractured - and God Himself immediately promises, in Genesis 3:15, that evil will one day be defeated. Identity, relationship, rupture, promise: a relational and self-expressive portrait of God, with redemption written into the story from the third chapter.

The Qur'an also tells the story of Adam - not as one continuous narrative but scattered across several surahs.² And in the retelling, the load-bearing details disappear. There is no Spirit hovering over the waters, no Word through whom all things are made, no "Let us," and no teaching that humanity is created in the image of God; humanity is instead Allah's steward (*khalifah*) on the earth. Creation happens by sheer command - "Be, and it is" - a portrait whose accent falls on sovereignty and transcendence. Adam's sin brings no lasting rupture between God and humanity of the kind Genesis describes, and there is no equivalent to the promise of Genesis 3:15. Allah is Creator, Commander and Forgiver, guiding humanity and calling it to repentance - but the drama of a broken relationship and a promised Redeemer is gone. The story is different from its first page; so, therefore, is the God the story reveals.

3. At the burning bush the Qur'an omits the Angel and the name I AM

Consider a second story - and note that Moses is mentioned in the Qur'an more than any other prophet. Exodus 3 is a foundational chapter, because in it God discloses His identity. Watch the text carefully: it is *the Angel of the LORD* who appears in the flame of the bush - yet the one who speaks says, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob," and then reveals the Name itself: "I AM WHO I AM." A figure who is sent, and who is at the same time identified as the LORD: distinction and divine identity held together in a single encounter.

Nor is this a one-off. The same pattern recurs across the Hebrew Bible.³ In Exodus 23:21-22 the LORD's messenger carries the divine Name and holds authority over the pardon of sin - no delegated power, but the Name itself. In Zechariah 2:8-11 the LORD speaks, and yet says "the LORD of hosts has sent me." In Isaiah 48:16 the divine speaker declares, "the Lord GOD has sent me, and his Spirit." Again and again God is presented as one, while showing personal distinction within His own identity.

The Qur'an tells the story of Moses at the fire across at least three surahs⁴ - and precisely these details are absent. There is no Angel of the LORD; Allah simply speaks. He is not identified as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob - the covenant self-introduction by which the God of Israel binds His identity to His promises. And there is no "I AM WHO I AM." What remains is command, authority and prophetic commissioning: Moses is sent, but the God who sends him no longer discloses Himself in the way Exodus records. The narrative is recognisably the same scene - and theologically a different world.

4. Islamic theology wrestles with a God unlike creation yet described in human terms

What, then, does Islam positively teach about God's oneness? To understand how Muslims describe Tawhid today, step into the ninth century. Under the Caliph al-Ma'mun, Greek philosophical works were translated into Arabic on a great scale through Baghdad's House of Wisdom - much of the translating done by Syriac-speaking Christians who carried the Greek intellectual tradition into the Islamic world. Greek philosophy raised new questions: how do reason and revelation fit together? The question was no longer only "What does the Qur'an say?" but "How should the Qur'an be understood?" Out of these debates was born *Kalām* - rational theology in defence of Islamic belief.

And a genuine dilemma stood at its centre. The Qur'an insists that Allah is utterly unlike creation - "there is nothing like unto Him"⁵ - and on this basis Islam rejects the Incarnation as inconceivable: for God to become human would compromise His transcendence. Yet the Qur'an and the Hadith repeatedly describe Allah in strikingly human terms: the Hand of Allah; His Face; creation "with My two hands"; rising over the throne; and "the Day the shin will be uncovered" (Quran 68.42).⁶ The Hadith tradition supplies the context for that last verse. In Sahih al-Bukhari - the collection Muslims regard as most reliable - on the Day of Judgement the Almighty comes to His people "in a shape other than the one they first saw," and is not recognised until they ask for the sign they know: "the shin." "Allah will then uncover His shin, whereupon every believer will prostrate before him."⁷ Another hadith teaches how to tell the false messiah from the Lord: al-Dajjal is one-eyed, "while your Lord is not one-eyed."⁸ Recognition requires a form; the texts supply one.

Muslim scholars responded in different ways. Some read such passages metaphorically - though the shin appears precisely as a recognition sign, which resists reduction to metaphor. Others developed the principle of *bilā kayf*: affirm the texts "without asking how." The tension is candidly managed rather than resolved. And it prompts a fair question: if Allah can appear in a shape, come to His people, and be recognised by a bodily sign, on what principled ground is the Incarnation - God drawing near in a human life - ruled out from the start?

5. The eternal Qur'an raises the very question Tawhid was meant to close down

The debates did not stop with the divine attributes. A deeper question arose: is the Qur'an itself created, or eternal? The Qur'an describes itself as inscribed in "the Mother of the Book," which the renowned commentator Ibn Kathir

glosses as being “with Allah.”⁹ If the Qur’an is the eternal speech of Allah, are there then two eternal realities - Allah, and His speech? How is absolute oneness maintained if Allah alone is eternal, yet His attribute of speech is also eternal and coexistent?

The question was felt so keenly that it turned violent. During the *Mihna* - an inquisition under al-Ma’mun - scholars who taught that the Qur’an was eternal were persecuted, and the officially enforced doctrine was that the Qur’an is created. Later Sunni orthodoxy reversed this, affirming the Qur’an as the uncreated, eternal speech of Allah - the position held to this day. Notice what has happened: the strictest form of divine oneness ends up confessing an eternal Word with God.

Christians will find this ground familiar - because it is the very question the doctrine of the Trinity answers. God has never been without His Word and His Spirit; the Word is not a second god standing beside Him but His own eternal self-expression - “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” ([John 1:1](#)). The difference is that the Bible’s Word is not a book but a person, who “became flesh and dwelt among us.” The question Islam’s own theology cannot avoid is one the Christian confession was built to answer.

6. The Qur'an rejects a Trinity of biological sonship and Mary that Christians never taught

Why, then, does the Qur’an deny the Trinity? Examine the reasons it actually gives.

First, sonship. In the Bible, “Son of God” is deep covenantal language. It flows from the promise to David in [2 Samuel 7](#) - a throne, a Son, a kingdom that will never end - and from the coronation psalm, “You are my Son; today I have begotten you” ([Psalms 2:7](#)). That is why the high priest’s question, “Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?”, joins the two titles as one thought. Sonship names an eternal relationship, not a biological event. The Qur’an, retelling without this storyline, takes sonship literally: “How could He have a son when He has no consort?” ([Quran 6:101](#)); “It is not befitting for Allah to take a son.”¹⁰ The objection lands on a claim the Bible never makes.

Second, the command “Do not say Three” ([Quran 4:171](#)), and the charge that Christians make Allah “the third of three” ([Quran 5:73](#)). But Christians have never taught three gods, nor that God is one member of a trio. Tritheism and Trinity are utterly different things: one God - one divine essence - eternally existing as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, each person fully God.

Third, and most striking: in [Quran 5:116](#) Allah asks Jesus, “Did you say to the people, ‘Take me and my mother as two gods besides Allah?’” - and Jesus denies it. The Trinity in view appears to be Allah, Jesus and *Mary*. Whatever fringe veneration this may have been responding to, it is not the faith of the Bible or of the early church: Mary is not, and never was, part of the doctrine of the Trinity. Jesus is not a biological son; the Bible does not teach tritheism; Mary is not divine. In each case, the Qur’an rejects a story the Bible never told.

7. Every conversation finally comes down to your view of how God has spoken: continuity and completion, or corruption and correction

Underneath each argument sit two rival frameworks for knowing God - for both faiths agree that God must reveal Himself. The biblical framework is *revelation, continuity, completion*: God unfolds His character through the story of Scripture, in history, keeping and fulfilling His promises until the story is complete. The Islamic framework, operating quietly behind almost every conversation, is *revelation, corruption, correction*: God gave His scriptures, human beings corrupted them, and the Qur’an came to correct what went wrong. This is why quoting the Bible is so often simply rejected - and why, on this view, there is no looking back from the seventh century to test how oneness is actually presented in the Torah, where [Genesis 3:15](#) and [Exodus 3](#) tell a different story. The fruitful question is therefore not to trade verses - “is it three or is it one?” - but to compare the frameworks themselves: which is more coherent, and more worthy of God - that He revealed, sustained and completed His word, or that He revealed it, lost it to corruption, and had to correct it?

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It must be admitted that Tawhid is attractive. Its appeal is simplicity: no wrestling with the Angel of the LORD, no Tabernacle to ponder - one God, and that is all; simple enough, it is often said, for a child to explain, while the Trinity seems complex and even irrational. But the question was never which picture of God is simpler. It is which God is real - and the God of the Bible reveals Himself not in a bare assertion of oneness but in a story: the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, who discloses His Name at the bush, keeps covenant across the centuries, and completes everything He has promised. Different stories, different God - which is precisely why the story matters.

References

1. 1 Quran 112 (al-Ikhlāṣ), among the most frequently recited passages of the Qur'an.
2. 2 Principally Quran 2.30-39 and Quran 7.11-27.
3. 3 Exodus 23:21-22; Zechariah 2:8-11; Isaiah 48:16 -passages long discussed for presenting divine unity together with personal distinction.
4. 4 Quran 20.9-24; Quran 27.7-14; Quran 28.29-35.
5. 5 Quran 42.11.
6. 6 E.g. Quran 48.10 (the Hand of Allah); Quran 55.27 (the Face); Quran 38.75 (creation with "My two hands"); Quran 20.5 (rising over the throne); Quran 68.42 (the shin uncovered).
7. 7 Sahih al-Bukhari, Book of Tawhid (see e.g. Bukhari 7439), which narrates the events of the Day of Resurrection and supplies the traditional context for Quran 68.42.
8. 8 Sahih al-Bukhari, Book of Tawhid (see e.g. Bukhari 7407); a parallel report adds that the word kāfir (unbeliever) is written between al-Dajjal's eyes.
9. 9 Quran 43.4 with Ibn Kathir's commentary ad loc.: "with Us" meaning "with Allah."
10. 10 Quran 19.35; cf. Quran 6.101 and Quran 4.171.