

# Jesus Among Other Gods (Ravi Zacharias)

The book discusses Jesus' answers to several questions in distinction to Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism. His were very unique and in a way that none other would have answered.

## 1. His Origin - Son of God

John the Baptist said to two of his own disciples: "Behold, the Lamb of God." The disciples turned from him to follow Jesus. The first question Jesus put to them was: "What do you want?" Andrew asked back: "Where do You live?"

In the East, the home is the defining cultural indicator. Everything that determines who you are is tied into your heritage and your social standing. Names, addresses, and family background are very defining. We can see that from Nathanael's response when he was first told about Jesus: "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"

Jesus, however, did not give a street name or a house number. To lift them beyond the "here" and "now" He said to them: "Come and see". The following day when Philip called Nathanael, he was cynical but was given the same challenge: "Come and see".

Jesus knew that Nathanael didn't think very much of Nazareth. So, recognizing what was in his heart, Jesus challenged him and said: "Here is a true Israelite, in whom there is nothing false". "How do You know me?" "I saw you under the fig tree, before Philip called you." "Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the King of Israel". "You believe because I told you I saw you under the fig tree. You shall see greater things than that.... I tell you the truth, you shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man" (John 1:50-51).

Jesus' references to a heavenly dwelling and to the angels ascending and descending in His service point to the fact that He is the Lord of heaven and earth who exists eternally. He was revealing the realm of His existence.

They were inclined to judge Jesus by His earthly father, Joseph the carpenter. They were trying to measure His worth by His earthly home, Nazareth. He opened up to them the truth that any earthly setting at which He is present

has nothing to do with His origin. "Where do You live?" asked the curious disciple. "With My heavenly Father" was the answer.

Even John the Baptizer testified of this difference: "A man can receive only what is given him from heaven.... The one who comes from above is above all; the one who is from the earth belongs to the earth, and speaks as one from the earth. The one who comes from heaven... testifies to what he has seen and heard". (John 3:27-32).

### ***Other religions***

All others who have claimed or been accorded prophetic status are still at best human beings on whom this call from God was bestowed. Their assignment is a given one. Jesus, in distinction, is the Supreme Giver Himself. He is "from above". His earthly sojourn was not an origination, but a visitation.

For example, Islam claims that at one point in his life, Mohammed was transported to heaven and saw a glimpse of what it is like. Regardless of all the confusing arguments over this claim, it does establish the fact that heaven was foreign to Mohammed. And that is the point of difference.

### ***What Proves His Claims of a Heavenly Origin***

The virgin birth of Jesus most certainly addresses that. For St. Mary herself to claim such an unusual conception meant risking her own life. Thus, His birth was not by natural means —a Son not born out of physical consummation, but He is the expression of God in the flesh.

A second proof is that Jesus' life has always been regarded as the purest that has ever been lived. No other individual has ever obtained such tributes. By their own admission, this includes Mohammed, Buddha, and Krishna.

In Surah 47 and 48, Mohammed was told to ask for forgiveness for sin. As for Buddha, the very fact that he endured rebirths implies a series of imperfect lives. He admitted that he was in search of the "Enlightenment".

Jesus alone emerges as the spotless One, untainted by any error. His unequivocal claim was that heaven was His dwelling and earth was His footstool. There never was a time when He was not and there never will be.

## 2. Feeding our Hunger — Eucharist

The people who saw Jesus performing the miracle of feeding the multitude followed Him with deliberate intentions. They lost sight of the purpose of the deed and longed only to replicate the capacity. Food and power distracted the mind from the need of nourishment for the soul.

They burst upon Him with a challenge to match the manna from heaven that Moses gave his people: "Our fathers ate manna in the desert.... Why don't You give us the same?" (John 6)

However, Jesus took pains to show them that they had a greater hunger that only He can satisfy. But, if we were to enumerate all our hungers, we might be surprised at how many there are: truth, love, belong, accomplishment, justice, significance, ...

However, we remain unfulfilled even when we pursue these hungers, because our hunger for something transcendent is so rooted in our very being.

His words were intended to lift the listeners from all their physical and psychological hungers to the recognition of the supreme hunger of life that could only be filled by different bread.

Therefore, to those who asked Him for bread, He replied: "I am the Bread of life. He who comes to Me shall never hunger, and he who believes in Me shall never thirst" (John 6:35)

After his conversation with the Samaritan woman (John 4:1-42), the disciples brought Him some food to eat, but He told them: "I have food to eat that you know nothing about. My food is to do the will of My Father".

If I am to be fulfilled, I must pursue a will that is greater than mine —a fulfilled life is one that has the will of God as its focus, not the appetite of the flesh.

Our greatest hunger, as Jesus described it, is for a relationship. It is the most sacred intimacy of all. That is why being a Christian is not just a way of living, but a way of relating and being.

### ***Other religions' view of identity***

Hindu claims that we are part of the divine universe: "We must find out for ourselves that inside us is a god or goddess in embryo that wants to be born so that we can express our divinity."

On the other extreme of the deification of the self lies Islam. In Islam, the distance between God and humanity is so vast. So, worship takes on an incredible clutter of activity, designed to bring the worshiper closer to God. Relationship is swallowed up by rules and repetition. Submission takes the place of the warmth of a relationship.

In the Christian message, the God who is distinct and distant came down and close to us so that we who are weak may be made strong and may be drawn close in communion with Him.

### ***Eucharist - True Body and Blood***

"I am the living Bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this Bread, he will live forever. This bread is My flesh, which I will give for the life of this world.... I tell you the truth, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. (John 6:51-53)

The fulfillment of this promise took place on the night of His death when He took bread and wine and said: "This is My body.... Take and eat." "This is My blood.... Drink all of it."

### ***How could He give us His body and blood to eat and drink?***

1. It is obvious that He did not mean literal eating of His physical flesh, because He was physically present when He gave them a piece of bread.
2. If He meant His physical flesh and blood, it means that only a small number could share in that life He offered. It would be restricted to the finite number of pieces a human body could be broken into.
3. It could not have been His physical body, because He already said that He would raise up that body after it was killed.
4. He commanded the Church to repeat Eucharist across history as a throwback to that moment. That would be impossible with His literal body.
5. He said that: "The words that speak to you are Spirit and truth"; His words were Spirit and not flesh.

This broken piece of bread represented what was about to happen on the cross. He was going to be physically and emotionally battered for our sakes. Communion of this broken bread gives us access to a new relationship, which is part of a larger body. We enjoy the indwelling of His presence in us.

His body is broken for all of us so that His nourishment, His friendship, His celebration, and His pleasure bind us together as one.

### **3. Teaching vs. Teacher**

At the heart of every major religion is the distinction between the person and the teaching: Mohammed, to the Koran - Buddha, to the Noble Path - Krishna, to his philosophies - Zoroaster, to his ethics. They are teachers who show some particular way.

By contrast, Jesus did not only teach His message, He was the message.

He did not just proclaim the truth. He said, "I am the truth."

He did not just show a way. He said, "I am the Way."

"I am the door."

"I am the Good Shepherd."

"I am the resurrection and the life."

"I am the I AM."

## 4. The Problem of Suffering and Evil

The disciples asked Jesus: "Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" He answered: "This happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life". They wanted this question answered because they sought an explanation of individual suffering. How does a good God allow so much evil?

Either evil proves that God does not exist, as the atheist avows, or evil is "not ultimately real evil." as the pantheist claims. or evil is most coherently explained by the Christian view of God and His purpose in creation.

### ***a- Evil exists; ,therefore, God does not***

Christianity provides a counterchallenge: If evil exists, then good must also exist in order to know the difference. Then a moral law must exist by which to measure good and evil. If a moral law exists, then who out it? God is necessary in order to posit the notions of good and evil.

Skeptics respond by asking: "Why cannot evolution explain our moral sense? Why do we need Cod?" We ask back: "How could an impersonal, amoral first cause through a nonmoral process produce a moral basis of life? Does it not seem odd that of all the permutations and combinations that a random universe might afford we should end up with the notions of the true, the good, and the beautiful?"

Nothing can be intrinsically, prescriptively good unless there also exists a God who has fashioned the universe thus.

Therefore, skeptics deny the existence of objective morel values because to accept such a reality would be to allow for the possibility of rod's existence. An objective moral law is by definition something that is transcendently true at all times, regardless of whether I believe it or not.

The denial of an objective moral law, based on the compulsion t9 deny the existence of God, results ultimately in the denial of evil itself.

*I asked a group of skeptics if I took a baby and sliced it to pieces before them, would I have done anything wrong? One answered: "I would not like it, but no, I could not say you have done anything wrong!"*

### ***b- Why God could not have made us to always choose good?***

In a world where love is the supreme ethic, freedom must be built in. A love that is programmed or compelled is not love; it is merely a conditioned response.

The man who wants to be loved does not desire the enslavement of the beloved, or seek passion which flows forth mechanically. If the beloved is transformed into an automaton, the lover finds himself alone.

Having the freedom to love when you may choose not to love is what gives love legitimate meaning.

To ask that we be denied freedom and only choose good is to ask not for love, but for compulsion and for something other than humanity.

### ***c- How do other religions answer the disciples' question?***

Hinduism: declares everything in the physical world to be nonreal. All good and evil are fused in the one ultimate reality, Brahman. In Brahman, says Krishna, the distinction breaks down.

That is, they call for the "illusion" of evil. However, to deny that evil is real does not diminish wickedness, nor does it daunt the heart's desire to seek purity. Nevertheless, so much of Hindu worship is steeped in purification rites!

Buddhism: In their doctrine of reincarnation, every individual is the sum total of what he or she did in his or her past life. Whatever actions I do, good or bad, I shall become their heir. Thus, the suffering of the blind man is the inheritance of his past life's sin.

In the state of "Enlightenment," the self is extinguished and all desire, and therefore, suffering, is gone. That is the goal of Buddhism.

Question: If life is cyclical and there is no beginning to the incarnations, why is there an end? Better yet, if every birth is a rebirth, what is a person paid for in his first birth?

Islam: Suffering is the punishment we get for our sins.

Question: How do you explain the man born blind? Is God so unjust as to inflict the punishment of the parents to their innocent child?

#### ***d- The Christian response of the existence of evil and suffering***

There are six points that combine to give a coherent and unique explanation:

1. God is holy and the Being in whom all goodness dwells. In fact, He is absolute holiness.
2. Not only is God holy, but He is the sacred nature of love. We all recognize a sacred love when we see it, and we long for it. That kind of love cannot be programmed. That is why God did not make us choose good.
3. If God is the Author of life, there must be a script. The individual subplot gains its direction from the larger story of God's purpose for our lives. Without God, nothing makes sense.
4. Jesus described His journey to the cross as the very purpose for which He came. It demonstrates the destructiveness of evil, which is the cause of suffering and, in Jesus' example, the ability to withstand suffering even though it is undeserved. Suffering and pain did not spare the very Son of God. In fact, the suffering of Jesus is a study in the anatomy of pain.
5. Goodness in the face of evil is magnificent. Our hearts melt and tears flood our eyes, because it is more than goodness; it is the touch of God. Jesus bore the brunt of the pain inflicted by the wickedness of His persecutors and showed us the heart of God. He displayed in His own suffering what the work of God is all about in changing our hearts from evil to holiness.

"God conquers not in spite of the dark mystery of evil, but through it"

6. Evil is more than an exterior reality that engenders universal suffering; it is an internal reality from which we run. The problem of evil begins with me.

"I hear you constantly expressing a desire to see a solution to the problem of evil around you. Are you as troubled by the problem of evil within you?"

Evil has ultimately one source. It is the resistance to God's holiness that blanketed all of creation (spiritual blindness).

However, the glorious display of God at work within a human soul brings about restoration and renewal. Such a transformation begins at the cross.

Like the blind man, those who have personally experienced Christ's power to transform their lives will understand the greater blindness from which they have been rescued.