Did Jesus Know the Hour of his return?

Big picture: Muslims love to reference Mark 13:32 as a clear indication that Jesus never claimed to be God. Reading the verse out of context and without a wider understanding of the incarnation, does seem at first reading to support the Muslim view. However, on further study, we see there is no contradiction between Jesus claiming to be God and claiming not to know the hour of his return.

1. Muslims claim that Jesus being limited in knowledge precludes him from being God



Of all the objections to the deity of Jesus in Mark's Gospel, Mark 13:32 is by far the trickiest to answer. From a Muslim perspective, the claim is simple. Does Jesus possess the attributes of God or not. If not, he cannot be God. One key attribute of God is omniscience, knowing all things. The problem with Mark 13:32 is that Jesus seems to claim categorically that he does not indeed know all things, on the topic of his day and hour of his return at least. Shabir Ally in his debate with Douglas Jacoby, states, "It is very clear that Jesus is a great prophet, he is God's Messiah and he has great powers but he also has limitations ... in Mark's Gospel Jesus denies that he has omniscience. He says of that hour no one knows not even the son but only the father, if Jesus does not have omniscience then he is not God.1"

It is worth remembering that the Muslim understanding of God is very different from the Christian view of God. Muslims believe in an indivisible, unitarian God, whereas Christians believe in a Triune God, of whom the second person of the Trinity, the Son, entered into the world taking on human flesh. This ultimately will provide a key explanation of why Jesus says what he does, but even so it can be a challenge to understand let alone explain what is going on.

2. The immediate and wider context of Mark is clear on Jesus' identity

Of course, in understanding Scripture, a good principle for understanding difficult verses is to let easier or clearer verses help us understand the harder ones. Mark is clear on who Christ is2, as is Jesus himself3. Jesus favourite title for himself, "Son of Man", is a direct reference from Daniel 7 that describes one with divine prerogatives and who is worshiped as God. This Son of Man in Mark, forgives sin, knows people's thoughts4, intimate details of his passion (See Mark 8:31-32, Mark 9:30-32 and Mark 10:32-34 but also Judas' betrayal, Mark 14:18-21, and Peter's denial, Mark 14:30), and will bring God's divine judgement as one "seated at the right hand of God" and "coming on the clouds of heaven". The Gospel too is full of Exodus motifs, Mark wanting to show us that Jesus is the God of the Exodus. At the heart of the Gospel too is the transfiguration, where the curtains are pull back and we get a glimpse of Jesus in his divine glory (Mark 9:2-8).

But even in Mark 13, in the passage in question there are direct references to his divinity. First, the chapter is full of Jesus speaking of future events, only known to God, focusing around the destruction of the temple in AD70 with Jesus making reference to the "Son of Man" coming on the clouds of heaven as the climax5.

Following verse 32, too, Jesus shares a parable where he describes himself as the owner of the house. In this parable, the owner of the house is equated with God as a divine judge in keeping with the idea of Jesus being the Son of Man.

3. Jesus willingly limited himself in becoming fully human

Jesus is fully God (John 1:1-2). He has always existed as God, being of the same nature of the Father6 while in relationship with the Father7 as the second person of the Trinity. However, in the incarnation Jesus took on human

flesh (John 1:14). Philippians 2:5-11 tells that, Jesus is "in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness."

Christians agree the Bible teaches that Christ has two natures united together in one person8, his divine nature and his human nature9. In taking on a human nature, says Paul in Philippians, Jesus chose to limit the access to attributes pertaining to his in his divine nature even though they remained to be his.

While Jesus possesses the divine attribute of being everywhere at one time (omnipresence), he chose to limit himself to time and space. While Jesus possesses the divine attribute of being omnipotent, Jesus chose to limit himself to weakness. He got hungry (Mark 11:12-13), he needed sleep and rest (Mark 7:24), he experienced suffering, pain and ultimately death (Mark 14:32-34, Mark 15:16-20, Mark 15:33-37).

It is also true that in his divine nature, Jesus knew all things (omniscience). Yet in his humanity he chose to limit himself to being born and having to learn how to walk, and grow in knowledge about the world and God (Luke 2:52), even if at times, his divine nature shone through.

One objection to the deity of Jesus in the Quran, was that he ate food (Quran 5.75) and many Muslims mock the idea that Jesus is God asking questions like, "Are you telling me that God had to go to the toilet?" These objections ignore the wonderful truth of the Gospel that in Jesus God has come to us to save us. He took on frail humanity to redeem humanity10.

Jesus not knowing the hour of his return may just be an expression of Jesus in humanity limiting himself in knowledge, even while in his divine nature, he knew all things. This is a well-accepted view among Bible scholars and a view that has been held through the church age. Calvin for example states:

> *For we know that in Christ the two natures were united in one person in such a manner that each retained its own properties; and more especially the Divine nature was in a state of repose, and did not at all exert itself, (The Divine nature was kept, as it were, concealed; that is, did not display its power) whenever it was necessary that the human nature should act separately, according to what was peculiar to itself, in discharging the office of Mediator. There would be no impropriety, therefore in saying that Christ, who knew all things, was ignorant of something in respect of his perception as a man; for otherwise he could not have been liable to grief and anxiety, and could not have been like us.1112*

4. Jesus may be speaking of knowledge in an experintial sense

While the above is true, it can be hard to explain to Muslims in the contexts of fast-moving conversations. As Muslims interpret everything they read in the Bible or hear from Christians though the framework of a unitarian God, there can be a lot of things to explain.

However, there are two more explanations that may be in play in this verse, that can be simpler to explain.

In 1 Corinthians 2:2 Paul, speaking of his ministry among the Corinthians, says that he chose to limit the knowledge he had, seeking to, "know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified." Obviously, Paul knew much more than the details of the crucifixion but chose to constrain himself to knowledge that he felt would be useful to his ministry.

It may be that Jesus too in Mark 13:32, is doing the same thing, deliberately constraining himself to limit the information he would disclose to the disciples. The Greek word that Paul uses for "know" in 1 Corinthians 2:2 is the same word for "know" in Mark 12:32.

In Trinitarian thinking, while each person, Father, Son and Spirit, share the same nature, the dynamics of the relationship between each person are different. In this instance Jesus could be simply saying that it is the prerogative of the Father to reveal this knowledge not the Son's.

5. Jesus was using wedding language to speak of his return

A third way of answering the objection is that Jesus was simply referring to the events leading up to his return saying that they will be similar to the events leading up to a Jewish wedding. In Jewish culture in the 1st century, marriages were largely arranged marriages and the father had a greater role in the organisation and timing of when the bride and bridegroom would get married.

Wedding language is common in the Bible. In the Old Testament, God is known as the Bridegroom (Isaiah 54:5, Isaiah 62:5, Hosea 2:19-20), language which is found in the New Testament pertaining to Christ, actually showing his deity13. The church is known as the Bride (John 3:29, Ephesians 5:25-27) and the day of judgement known as the wedding of the Lamb (Revelation 19:7-9).

As part of the wedding preparations, rooms would be built on the house of the father to make room for the husband and his bride to live (cf. John 14:2). The father would decide when the preparations for the wedding were complete, which meant that the father knew when it was the best time to get his bridge and move in. Of course, the Bridegroom would have been party to this knowledge as weddings in the time would have been large community events. However, out of respect for the father, he would be the one to actually decide the hour when all was ready and the wedding festivities would start14.

This understand of the cultural context fits with the context of the chapter, with events moving towards the wedding clear for all to see and understand, but with the hour the prerogative of the father to decide. The preceding parable of the fig tree also follows the same pattern of things visibly moving towards the summer. The following illustration of the owner of the house also follows the same pattern15.

In Matthew (Matthew 24:36), the declaration that only the Father knows the hour, is followed by the parable of the ten virgins showing the idea that Jesus is using wedding language fits well with the textual context.

References

1. *1 https://youtu.be/quQCAcMCpes?si=-6sxml2gjGasM1ld&t=2721*
2. *2 Mark 1:1-3 – here Mark uses two Old Testament quotes, Malachi 3:1 and Isaiah 40:3 and applies them to Jesus.*
3. *3 Mark 14:62 Jesus claims divinity using three separate Old Testament references for God. See "Deity of Jesus in Mark's Gospel"*
4. *4 Cf. 1 Kings 8:39 (only God knows the human heart) and John 16:30 and John 21:17 which show Jesus knew all things before and after the resurrection...*
5. *5 Mark 13:26*
6. *6 "The Word was God" John 1:1-2*
7. *7 "The Word was with God" John 1:1-2*
8. *8 This is known as the "hypostatic union" see: https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/what-is-the-hypostatic--union*
9. *9 This was agreed and affirmed by the church 100s of years before Islam in the "Chalcedonian Creed" in AD 451. It states, "Therefore, following the holy fathers, we . . . teach men to acknowledge one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, at once complete in Godhead and complete in manhood, truly God and truly man . . . of one substance with the Father as regards his Godhead, and at the same time of one substance with us as regards his manhood; like us in all respects, apart from sin; . . . recognized in two natures, without confusion, without change, without division, without separation; the distinction of natures being in no way annulled by the union, but rather the characteristics of each nature being preserved and coming together to form one person and subsistence, not as parted or separated into two persons, but one and the same Son and Only-begotten God the Word, Lord Jesus Christ; even as the prophets from earliest times spoke of him, and our Lord Jesus Christ himself taught us, and the creed of the fathers has handed down to us." Chalcedonian Creed, Center for Reformed Theology and Apologetics, 451, http://reformed.org/documents/-index.html?mainframe=http://reformed.org/documents/chalcedon.html (accessed December 5, 2009).*
10. *10 Irenaeus (Against Heresies, Book 5, Preface): "...the only true and steadfast Teacher, the Word of God,*

our Lord Jesus Christ, who did, through His transcendent love, become what we are, that He might bring us to be even what He is Himself."

11. *11 Calvin and Pringle, "Commentary on Matthew, Mark, Luke," 24.36.*
12. *12 See also Calvin's Institutes (14.1) "For we maintain, that the divinity was so conjoined and united with the humanity, that the entire properties of each nature remain entire, and yet the two natures constitute only one Christ. If, in human affairs, any thing analogous to this great mystery can be found, the most apposite similitude seems to be that of man, who obviously consists of two substances, neither of which however is so intermingled with the other as that both do not retain their own properties. For neither is soul body, nor is body soul. Wherefore that is said separately of the soul which cannot in any way apply to the body; and that, on the other hand, of the body which is altogether inapplicable to the soul; and that, again, of the whole man, which cannot be affirmed without absurdity either of the body or of the soul separately. Lastly, the properties of the soul are transferred to the body, and the properties of the body to the soul, and yet these form only one man, not more than one. Such modes of expression intimate both that there is in man one person formed of two compounds, and that these two different natures constitute one person. Thus the Scriptures speak of Christ. They sometimes attribute to him qualities which should be referred specially to his humanity and sometimes qualities applicable peculiarly to his divinity, and sometimes qualities which embrace both natures, and do not apply specially to either. This combination of a twofold nature in Christ they express so carefully, that they sometimes communicate them with each other, a figure of speech which the ancients termed ijdiwmavtwn koinoniva (a communication of properties).*"
13. *13 In Mark Jesus calls himself the Bridegroom (Mark 2:19, see also Matthew 9:15).*
14. *14 See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sfdozl26lQQ*
15. *15 See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G5A7oRR1iuI*