Why Jesus is Good and God

Big picture: The Quran denies the deity of Jesus. Muslims often point to Mark 10:18 to show that Jesus himself claimed not to be God. A careful reading of the passage in question, however, shows that rather than denying his divinity, Jesus in this very passage is claiming to be the divine Saviour.

1. Muslims use Mark 10:18 to claim Jesus isn't God



The Quran denies the deity of Jesus1. Muslims seeking to bolster this claim, look for passages in the Bible that support the Quran's position. One verse Muslims will often cite2, is Mark 10:18. In this passage (Mark 10:17-31) a man runs up to Jesus falls on his knees and asks him what he must do to inherit eternal life. To this Jesus responds with a statement that could at first glance suggest that Jesus is claiming not to be God, as answering the man Jesus asks him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good—except God alone." (Mark 10:18). At first glance, this response seems to distance Jesus from the divine attribute of goodness, which is why it is so popular with Muslims. However, when we understand the context and purpose of Jesus' response, we see that Jesus is far from claiming NOT to be God, in fact the very opposite.

2. Muslims ignore the content of the verse

The two phrases that Muslims focus on in this verse are, the question, "why do you call me good?" and a statement, "no one is good but God alone." While there does seem to be some weight to the Muslim claim, neither part of the verse, or the two taken together negate the possibility that Jesus could be God. In the first part of the verse Jesus is merely enquiring motivation for calling him good. When it comes to the second part of the verse, when Jesus says, "there is no one good but God alone", there are two ways to read this. It is possible to understand Jesus to be saying he isn't God, and the man was wrong to call him good. However, it is possible to understand Jesus to be God. In this case we can understand Jesus' statement as a question to undermine the man's presuppositions as to who he perceives Jesus to be. Ultimately his view of Jesus is inadequate - he is more than a good Rabbi - He is God. At the same time he is addressing the man's view that goodness is a possible way to attain eternal life.

For Muslims, either interpretation is problematic. They can't for obvious reasons hold that Jesus is God. At the same time, understanding Jesus to say, "no one is good except God alone" is also problematic. The Quran has a very high view of the prophets, and many Muslims claim they were sinless3. Contrary to this, even Muhammed was told in the Quran to ask for forgiveness for his sins4. However, in Islam, Jesus is uniquely said to be sinless in both the Quran5 and the Hadith6. If anyone therefore could be called good, it is Jesus – according to Muslims. Muslims cannot claim that "no one is good but God alone".

3. Muslims ignore the context of the verse

Following on from this, it is good to observe that Muslims quoting this verse to attack the deity of Jesus, never seek to understand the verse in its context. When we read verses on their own it is much easier to either misunderstand or misrepresent a verse, but in the Bible, verses are rarely written in isolation from a wider narrative. This is particularly true of the Gospels. These words of Jesus in particular are deeply linked to the conversation he has with the man, and the disciples following that. If we don't look at those verses carefully, we won't be able to understand what Jesus is saying at the start of the passage.

There is also the wider context of Mark too. Right throughout the Gospel Mark tells us and shows us that Jesus can be no one than God himself7. So, to understand this verse going against that context is not the best reading, especially if

an interpretation of v18 exists that fits Mark's wider understanding of Jesus.

4. Muslims ignore the presuppositions of the man

What is interesting about the man is that his thinking is filled with incorrect assumptions. First, he thinks Jesus is just a Rabbi. Although he falls on his knees in front of Jesus, there is no indication that he recognises his Lordship. Second, assuming Jesus is just a teacher, he has an unhealthy connection between religiousness and goodness. We have seen in Mark 7, that even the most religious can be far from good and from God (Mark 7:1-13). "Good" therefore can never be an designation for anyone who shares in humanities uncleanness (Mark 7: 20-22). This is primarily what Jesus is addressing in verse 18.

However, a third wrong assumption is that he thinks that it is possible to attain eternal life by being good. This is the key thing that Jesus addresses in his thinking as he references a number of the 10 commandments. The 10 commandments[8] are divided into two main groups: those that pertain to one's relationship with God and those that pertain to one's relationship with others.

Jesus interestingly only quotes the second set of commands, those that pertain to one's relationship with others. It is these commands that the main claims to have kept, "since a boy".

Whether that is true or not, Jesus then seeks to lovingly show him[9], that fundamentally he has broken the more important commandments that pertain to one's relationship with God. This is seen by the fact that he is unwilling to give up his riches. He is guilty of idolatry, breaking the first (and greatest – as Jesus later defines it) command.

5. Muslims ignore that Jesus claims to be divine in this very passage

The key thing that Muslims miss however in ignoring the context is that Jesus does go on to claim to be divine, in this very passage.

First, he tells the man that the alternative to continuing to live a life where his riches are his god, is to exchange his riches for following Jesus. "Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me." (Mark 10:21) The correction to idolatry is putting Jesus in his correct place.

This claim to "follow me" in the broader context of the Bible is unique to God. No other prophet or leader call others to follow them in this way, it is unique to God. Caleb is said to have followed the LORD wholeheartedly (Deuteronomy 1:36, Joshua 14:14). The inverse is true of the original generation of Isarel who in the wilderness failed to follow the LORD wholeheartedly (Numbers 32:11) among their many sins, was idolatry (e.g. Exodus 32:1-2, 1 Corinthians 10:1-6).

However, it is in the conversation between Jesus and his disciples that an even clearer claim to be God can be seen. After the man goes away sad, Jesus continues the conversation about entering eternal life. It is not just "hard" for the rich to enter life (v23, again the idea is that we are universally prone to idolatry), but that it is "impossible". That is at least for man. "Who then can be saved?", they ask "With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God."

What Jesus goes on to tell us is that he has come to do the impossible, provide salvation, something that only God can do. He has come to save sinful men and women, that they might inherit eternal life. Jesus in the following verses spells out exactly what he will do to achieve that. He will go to the cross to die (Mark 10:32-34) and concluding this section in Mark says, "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." (Mark 10:45) Mark will finish his Gospel too with Jesus explaining that his blood will be poured out for the salvation of many. (Mark 14:24)

An interesting parallel passage can be found in Psalms 49:7-9. There the Psalm agrees with Jesus, that:

> *No one can redeem the life of another*

or give to God a ransom for them—
the ransom for a life is costly,
no payment is ever enough—
so that they should live on forever
and not see decay.

But yet the Psalmist recognises that:

> *...God will redeem me from the realm of the dead;*
> *he will surely take me to himself. (Psalms 49:15)*
>
> *The logic is clear: No one can save themselves, or anyone else. it is impossible for man, but possible for God. Jesus came to save many, therefore he must be God.*

References

1. *1 https://ccistudyapp.com/key-sources/deity-of-christ/the-jesus-of-islam/*
2. *2 E.g. Shabir Ally https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=quQCAcMCpes&t=2734s*
3. *3 Zakir Naik: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2s0AMvg5VAQ. Also, the footnote on Quran 47.19 of Dr. Mustafa Khattab's "Clear Quran" translation (https://quran.com/en/muhammad/19) says: "Like other prophets, Muḥammad was infallible of sin. The verse here refers to misjudgments, such as the example given in Quran 80.1-10. If the Prophet himself is urged to seek forgiveness, then the believers are even more in need of praying for Allah's forgiveness."*
4. *4 See Quran 47.19. See also Quran 48.1-2. Quran 40.55, Muslim 2603*
5. *5 Quran 19.19*
6. *6 Bukhari 3286, Bukhari 6565*
7. *7 See "The Deity of Jesus is Mark's Gospel"*
8. *8 Exodus 20:1-17 and Deuteronomy 5:6-21*
9. *9 v21*