

## CHAPTER 14

### EXALTATION OF JESUS

(A letter was received by the Senate of the Great Al-Azhar University of Cairo from Abdul Karim Khan, from the Middle East, which contained an inquiry: Is Jesus dead or alive according to the Qur'ān and the Traditions of the Prophet? What do you think of a Muslim who does not believe that he is still alive and what about one who does not acknowledge him in case he comes to the world for the second time? This question was referred to the Senior Professor Shaikh Maḥmūd Shaltut, who later on became Rector of the University. The Fatwah is reproduced verbatim below.)<sup>1</sup>

“. . . Now, the Qur'ān mentions Prophet Jesus in reference to his fate at the hands of his people in three chapters:

1. In the chapter *The Family of 'Imrān* it is stated:

“But when Jesus perceived unbelief on their part, he said:  
Who will be my helpers in Allāh's way? The disciples said: We are helpers in Allāh's way: We believe in Allāh and bear thou witness that we are submitting ones. Our Lord, we believe in that which Thou hast revealed and we follow the messenger, so write us down with those who bear witness. And they (the Jews) planned and Allāh (also) planned. And Allāh is the best of planners. When Allāh said: O Jesus, I will cause thee to die and exalt thee in My presence and clear thee of those who disbelieve and make those who follow thee above those who disbelieve to the Day of Resurrection. Then to Me is your return, so I shall decide between you concerning that wherein you differ.”<sup>2</sup>

2. In the chapter *The Women* Allah says:

“And for their saying: We have killed the Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary, the messenger of Allāh, and they killed him not, nor did they cause his death on the cross, but was made to appear to them as such. And certainly those who differ therein are in doubt about it. They have no knowledge about it, but only follow a conjecture, and they killed him not for certain: Nay, Allāh exalted him in His presence. And Allāh is ever Mighty, Wise”.<sup>3</sup>

3. And in the chapter *The Food* says Allāh:

“And when Allāh will say: O Jesus, son of Mary, didst you say to men, Take me and my mother for two gods besides Allāh? He will say: Glory be to Thee! it was not for me to say what I had no right to (say). If I had said it, Thou

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1. Translated into English by S. Muhammad Tufail, M.A. The original appeared in the Arabic Weekly *Al-Risālah* of Cairo (Vol. 10, No. 462 at p. 515). The Quranic references given in the

footnotes did not appear in the original *Fatwah*, but are being given for easy reference.

2. The Quran, 3 : 52-55.

3. *Ibid.*, 4 : 157-158.

wouldst indeed have known it. Thou knowest what is in my mind, and I know not what is in Thy mind. Surely Thou art the great Knower of the unseen. I said to them naught save as thou didst command me: Serve Allah, my Lord and your Lord; and I was a witness of them so long as I was among them, but when Thou didst cause me to die Thou wert the watcher over them, and Thou art Witness of all things.<sup>1</sup>

These are the verses of the Holy Qur'an wherein all that Jesus experienced at the hands of his people is related.

In the last verse (from the chapter *The Food*) there is mention of an incident of the Hereafter when Allāh will ask Jesus concerning he and his mother being worshipped in the world. And Jesus in reply would say that he did not say aught to them except what God commanded him viz., Worship Allāh Who is your God and my God; and he kept a watch over them, during the period of his stay among them and that he did not know what they did after "Allāh caused him to die."

The word *tawaffā* is used in so many places of the Qur'an in the sense of death that it has become its foremost meaning. This word is used in a different sense only when there is a clear indication as to the other meaning: "Say: The angel of death, who is given charge of you, shall cause you to die;"<sup>2</sup> "(As for) those whom the angels caused to die while they are unjust to themselves;"<sup>3</sup> "And if thou couldst see when the angels will cause to die those who disbelieve,"<sup>4</sup> "Our messengers cause him to die";<sup>5</sup> "And of you is he who is caused to die;"<sup>6</sup> "Until death takes them away;"<sup>7</sup> "Make me die in submission and join me with the righteous."<sup>8</sup>

The word *tawaffaytāni* in this particular verse primarily means natural death which is known to everybody. The Arabic-speaking people understand this and only this meaning of the word with reference to the context. Therefore, had there been nothing else to indicate the end of Jesus in this verse even then it would have been improper and wrong to say that Prophet Jesus was alive, and not dead.

There is no room for the view that the word *wafāt* here means the death of Jesus after his descent from the heavens—a view held by some who think that Jesus is still alive in the heavens and would come down from there in the latter days. For, this verse clearly denotes the relation of Jesus with his own people and not with any other people of the latter days. The people of the latter age would admittedly be the followers of Muhammad and not of Jesus.

However, in the chapter *The Women* the words: "Nay: Allāh exalted him (Jesus) in His presence" have been interpreted by some, nay most of the commentators, as "raising him up to the heavens." They observe that Allāh cast his likeness on someone else

1. The Quran, 5 : 116-117.

2. *Ibid.*, 32 : 11.

3. *Ibid.*, 4 : 97.

4. *Ibid.*, 8 : 50.

5. *Ibid.*, 6 : 61.

6. *Ibid.*, 22 : 5.

7. *Ibid.*, 4 : 15.

8. *Ibid.*, 12 : 101.

and Jesus himself was lifted up to the heavens with his body. He is alive there and will descend therefrom in the latter ages. Thereafter he would kill the swine and break the Cross. And they base their story:

Firstly, on those reports in which the descent of Jesus is mentioned after the (appearance of) Anti-Christ. But these reports are at variance with and contradictory to one another in their words and meanings. The difference is so great that there is no room for any reconciliation among them. The scholars of Ḥadīth have plainly stated this fact. Moreover they are reported by Wahāb bin Munabbā and Ka'b Akbar, who were converts from the People of the Book. And their status is well known to critics of Traditions.

Secondly, on a report by Abu Huraira that mentions the descent of Jesus. If this report is proved to be true, even then it is only an isolated report. And there is a consensus of opinion of the scholars of Ḥadīth that such isolated reports can neither be made the basis of a doctrinal belief, nor can they be trusted with regard to things unseen.

Thirdly, on the report about *Mir'āj* (i.e., the Ascension of the Prophet to the heavens) which narrates that when the Prophet went up and began to have the gates of the heavens opened one after another and entered them as they were opened, he saw Jesus and his cousin John on the second heaven. For us, it is enough to prove the weakness of this evidence, that many interpreters of the Tradition have taken this contact of the Prophet with other prophets to be a spiritual phenomenon and not a physical one (vide *Faṭḥ al-Bārī*, *Zād al-Ma'ad*, etc.)

Strangely enough they interpret the word *rafa'* in this verse in the light of the report concerning the *Mi'rāj*, and deduce therefrom that Jesus was also bodily raised up. And there are others who regard the meeting of the Prophet with Jesus to be a physical one on the basis of this verse, (i.e., Nay! Allāh exalted him in His presence). Thus when these people interpret the Ḥadīth they quote this verse to support their imaginary meaning of the Ḥadīth; and while interpreting the verse they cite this Ḥadīth to support their imaginary explanation of the verse.

When we turn to the revealed words of God: "I will cause you to die and exalt you in My presence," in the chapter *The Family of 'Imrān* along with the words: "Nay! Allāh exalted him in His presence," in the chapter *The Women*, we find that the latter verse fulfills the promise that was made in the former one. This promise was about the death and exaltation of Jesus Christ, and his exoneration from the false charges of the disbelievers. Thus even if the latter verse had mentioned just his *rafa'* towards God and had no reference to his death and exoneration from the false charges even then it should have been our duty to take note of all those matters that are referred to in the former verse; so that both the verses might be reconciled.

The actual meaning of the verse therefore is that Allah caused Jesus to die and exalted him and sanctified him against the charges of his enemies. Allāma Alwāsi has

interpreted verse (*innī mutawaffī ka*) in many ways. The clearest of these interpretations is that “I will complete the lease of your life and will cause you to die and will not let those people dominate you who try to kill you.” For, completing the period of his life and causing him to die a natural death indicates that Jesus was saved from being slain and from the mischief of his enemies. Obviously *rafaʿ* after death cannot mean any physical ascension, but only exaltation in rank, especially when the words “I will clear you of those who disbelieve” are present along with it. This shows that it is a question of spiritual honour and exaltation. The word *rafaʿ* has occurred many a time in the Qurʾan conveying this sense: e.g., “In houses which Allah has permitted to be exalted (*turfaʿa*);”<sup>1</sup> “We exalt in dignity (*narfaʿu*) whom We please;”<sup>2</sup> “And We exalted (*rafaʿna*) for you your mention;”<sup>3</sup> “And We raised him (*rafanāhu*) to an elevated state;”<sup>4</sup> “Allah will exalt those of you who believe...;”<sup>5</sup> etc. Thus the expressions “I will exalt you in my presence” and “Nay! Allah exalted him in His presence” would yield a sense similar to the one when we say “So and so met the Companion on High,” or “God is with us,” or “With the Powerful King.” All these expressions signify only shelter, protection and coming under His care. So one fails to understand how the word *heaven* is deduced from the word *towards Him (ilaih)*. By God! it is an outrage on the plain exposition of the Quran. And such an offense is committed simply on account of belief in such stories and narratives which are devoid of accuracy, not to speak of their established unauthenticity.

Moreover, Jesus was merely an apostle and apostles before him had passed away. When the people of Jesus became hostile to him, he like other prophets, turned towards God and He saved him by His power and wisdom, and frustrated the plans of his enemies. The same point has been elaborated in the following verse: “When Jesus perceived unbelief on their part, he said: Who will be my helpers in Allāh’s way...” i.e., in this verse God says that His plans were more subtle and effective than the plans of the disbelievers. As against the measures of protection and security from God, the attempts of these people against the life of Jesus were frustrated. In the verse: “When Allāh said: O Jesus! I will cause thee to die and exalt thee in My presence and clear thee of those who disbelieve,” Allāh gives the glad tidings that He will save Jesus from the machinations of his enemies and that ultimately their plottings will end in futility and that He will complete the period of his life till he dies a natural death neither being slain nor yet crucified and *then* He will exalt him in His presence.

These verses which relate to the fate of Jesus at the hands of his people will invariably yield this meaning to their reader provided he knows the practice of Allah to which He resorts for the protection of His prophets at the time of the aggression of enemies, and provided his mind is free from all those fictitious reports that can in no case be placed as an authority over the Holy Quran. Now, I cannot understand how the

1. The Quran, 24 : 36

2. *Ibid.*, 6 : 84; 12 : 76.

3. *Ibid.*, 94 : 4.

4. *Ibid.*, 19 : 57

5. *Ibid.*, 58 : 11

snatching of Jesus from the hands of his enemies and lifting him up to the heavens can be called a subtle plan and a better one when neither was it in their power nor in the power of anybody else to counter it. In fact, there can be one “plan” (*makr*) as against another plan when it is contrived in a parallel manner not deviating from the natural course of Allah in such matters. We have a parallel instance in what is said by the Quran with respect of the Holy Prophet:

“And when those who disbelieved devised plans against you that they might confine you or slay you or drive you away; and they devised plans and Allāh too had arranged a plan; and Allāh is the best of planners.”<sup>1</sup>

To sum up:

1. There is nothing in the Holy Quran, nor in the sacred Traditions of the Prophet, which endorses the correctness of the belief to the contentment of heart that Jesus was taken up to heaven with his body and is alive there even now, and would descend therefrom in the latter days.
2. The Quranic verses about Jesus show that God had promised to cause him to die a natural death, then to exalt him and save him from the mischief of the disbelievers and this promise had certainly been fulfilled. His enemies could neither kill him nor crucify him, but God completed the span of his life and then caused him to die.
3. Any person who denies his bodily ascent and his continuance in physical existence in the heavens and his descent in the latter ages, does not deny a fact that can be established by clear conclusive arguments. Thus he is not outside the faith of Islam and it is absolutely wrong to consider him an apostate. He is perfectly a Muslim. If he dies he dies the death of a believer and like believers his funeral prayer must be said and he must be buried in the Muslim cemetery. His faith is decidedly faultless in the eyes of God. And God knows the conditions of His servants.

And as to the other part of the question (that is supposing Jesus returns to the world, how should a disbeliever in him be regarded) after the above statement of ours—this question does not arise at all. And God is the Best Knower.

**Mahmud Shaltut**

*For Arabic text of Mahmud Shaltut's letter and further discussion, see Appendix 4.*

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1. The Quran, 8 : 30.