

The Muslim Jesus: Dead or alive?

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Abstract

According to most classical Muslim commentators the Quran teaches that Jesus did not die. On the day of the crucifixion another person – whether his disciple or his betrayer – was miraculously transformed and assumed the appearance of Jesus. He was taken away, crucified, and killed, while Jesus was assumed body and soul into heaven. Most critical scholars accept that this is indeed the Quran’s teaching, even if the Quran states explicitly only that the Jews did not kill Jesus. In the present paper I contend that the Quran rather accepts that Jesus died, and indeed alludes to his role as a witness against his murderers in the apocalypse. The paper begins with an analysis of the Quran’s references to the death of Jesus, continues with a description of classical Muslim exegesis of those references, and concludes with a presentation of the Quran’s conversation with Jewish and Christian tradition on the matter of Jesus’ death.

In Richard Burton’s account of his covert pilgrimage to Mecca and Medina, he describes visiting the devotional area outside the chamber (*hujra*, by tradition the room of Muḥammad’s beloved wife ‘Ā’isha) of the Prophet’s mosque. The chamber itself, Burton discovered, was kept out of view by an ornate curtain. Still he reports that on the other side of the curtain were arranged the tombs of Muḥammad, Abū Bakr, and ‘Umar. Moreover, Burton adds with amazement, next to these tombs was a “spare place for only a single grave, reserved for Isa bin Maryam after his second coming”.¹ If Burton (whose travelogues tend towards the incredible) can be trusted, the Prophet’s mosque itself was arranged in keeping with the prevalent Islamic teaching that Jesus escaped death on the cross, that instead God raised him body and soul to heaven, and that God will send him back to earth in the end times.

This teaching is standard in classical Muslim literature. Ibn Hishām has Muḥammad himself insist on it before the delegation of Christians from Najrān.² More recently it has become a sort of shibboleth of orthodoxy, as the rejection of this teaching is one of the accusations made against the Aḥmadiyya movement.³ Meanwhile, most Western scholars of Islam agree

- 1 R. Burton, *Pilgrimage to al-Madinah and Meccah* (London: Tylston and Edwards, 1893), 1:325.
- 2 *Ibn Ishāq, Sīrat rasūl Allāh*, ed. F. Wüstenfeld, *Das Leben Muhammeds nach Muḥammad Ibn Ishāq* (Göttingen: Dieterich, 1858–60), 409; English trans: Muḥammad Ibn Ishāq, *The Life of Muḥammad*, trans. A. Guillaume (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1955), 276.
- 3 See W. C. Smith, “Aḥmadiyya”, *EF*², 1:301b.

that the Quran denies the death of Jesus. Not infrequently they assume that this denial reflects the influence of Christian docetism.

Yet Islamic tradition itself is not entirely unanimous on the question of Jesus' death. Alternative traditions are not infrequently found in the classical commentaries according to which Jesus died before ascending to heaven. More recently Mahmoud Ayoub has argued on theological grounds that the Quran does not deny his death.⁴ In the present paper, meanwhile, I will make the same argument but on philological grounds, examining the relevant passages in the Quran, Islamic exegesis on these passages, and the Quran's subtext.

1. Quranic material

The *locus classicus* for the question of Jesus' death is *sūrat al-nisā'* (4) 157–8. In verse 157 the Quran begins, "... and as for their statement, 'We killed the Christ, Jesus the son of Mary, the messenger of God', they did not kill him or crucify him", and continues with the phrase: *wa-lakin shubbiha la-hum*. The passive verb *shubbiha* here is the crux (no pun intended) of the matter. As Todd Lawson points out it is a *hapax legomenon* in the Quran; indeed it is the only time the root *sh.b.h.* appears in the second form.⁵ That it appears in the passive voice here (according to the standard vocalization, at least) renders its meaning still more elusive. The entire phrase, in fact, is *per se* ambiguous and translators are accordingly divided. Some, following the prevalent Islamic tradition, understand this phrase to mean something like, "Rather his image was made to appear to them". Blachère translates, "Mais que son sosie a été substitué à leur yeux". Paret (with his ubiquitous parenthetical explanations) arrives at a similar translation, "Vielmehr erschien ihnen (ein anderer) ähnlich (so daß sie ihn mit Jesus verwechselten und töteten)". Meanwhile, Arberry's translation – which is often quoted in secondary literature – has, "Only a likeness of that was shown to them". All of these translations suggest that someone other than Jesus died in his place.

Yet other translators seem to follow a remarkably different interpretation of *wa-lakin shubbiha la-hum*. Thereby the phrase is applied not to Jesus, but to the event of the Crucifixion, and understood to mean, "It was made unclear to them". Pickthall, for example, translates, "But it appeared so unto them". Yusuf Ali similarly has, "But so it was made to appear unto them". The recent translations of Fakhry and Abdel Haleem are similar.⁶ Of course, these translations

4 See M. Ayoub, "Towards an Islamic Christology II: the death of Jesus, reality or delusion?", *The Muslim World* 70, 1980, 91–121. Ayoub argues that the idea that someone or something other than Jesus appeared on the Cross is inconsistent with the Quran's theological principles. He asks (p. 104), "Would it be in consonance with God's covenant, his mercy and justice to deceive humanity for so many centuries?"

5 B. T. Lawson, "The Crucifixion of Jesus in the Qur'an and qur'anic commentary: a historical survey", *The Bulletin of the Henry Martin Institute of Islamic Studies* 10, 1991, (2, 34–62; 3, 6–40), 2, 40.

6 Fakhry: "But so it was made to appear unto them" (precisely that of Yūsuf 'Alī). Abdel Haleem: "Though it was made to appear like that to them". *The Qur'ān*, trans. M. Fakhry (Reading: Garnet, 1996); *The Qur'ān*, trans. M. Abdel Haleem (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

might still be read in accordance with the traditional Islamic notion that Jesus escaped death. A translator has recourse to ambiguity.⁷ A commentator, on the other hand, does not.

Indeed, the short phrase *wa-lakin shubbiha la-hum* compels classical Muslim commentators to take a definitive position on the death of Christ. For the most part they justify their position with various (and often contradictory) haggadic narratives that describe how a substitute took the place of Jesus on the Cross. Yet those narratives appear to be a product of exegesis, and not its source.

On the other hand, the Quran itself never denies the death of Jesus but rather alludes to it in several passages. In one passage the Quran has Jesus himself declare, "Peace upon me on the day I was born, on the day I die, and on the day I will be sent forth alive" (Q 19.33). Here Jesus – speaking miraculously as an infant – implies that his death will be like that of any other human.⁸ In fact, the words of Jesus in this verse are a formula found also 18 verses earlier (Q 19.15). There it is Zechariah calling down peace on his son John on the day of his birth, death and resurrection.

Elsewhere the Quran seems to allude to that death as an event of history. *Sūrat al-mā'ida* (5) 17 asks, "If God desired to take the life (*yuhlika*) of Jesus the Son of Mary, and his mother, and everyone on earth, who could resist Him?" Here the Quran implies that the death of Jesus – like all deaths – was the act of God. Elsewhere in this same Sūra the Quran notes: "Jesus, son of Mary, is only a Messenger. Messengers have passed away before him" (Q 5.75). Once again this is a formula, in this case a formula applied elsewhere to the Quran's own prophet: "Muḥammad is only a Messenger. Messengers have passed away before him" (Q 3.144).

The clearest reference to Jesus' death may be later in *sūrat al-mā'ida*. In a verse that is part of a larger dialogue (vv. 116–8) between God and Jesus, Jesus remarks "I was a witness to them as long as I remained among them. You became the watcher of them when you made me die (*tawaffaytānī*)". The verb *tawaffā* (verbal noun: *tawaffī*) that appears here causes significant confusion among Muslim exegetes. Yet the Quran itself offers no cause for confusion. *Tawaffā* appears in twenty-five passages in the Quran, and twice in relation to Jesus (here and Q 3.55). For twenty-three of those passages the Muslim commentators generally follow the standard definition of this term,

7 Yusuf Ali's footnote here only adds to the ambiguity: "The Qur'ānic teaching is that Christ was not crucified nor killed by the Jews, notwithstanding certain apparent circumstances which produced that illusion in the minds of some of his enemies", *The Meaning of the Holy Qur'an*, trans. 'Abdallāh Yūsuf 'Alī (Beltsville, MD: Amana, 1996), 236, n. 663.

8 Muslim commentators, however, often insist that Jesus is here referring to his death in the eschaton, when God will send him back to the world from his heavenly refuge. Parrinder retorts, "There is no futurity in the grammar of the Qur'an to suggest a post-millennial death". Geoffrey Parrinder, *Jesus in the Qur'an* (London: Faber and Faber, 1965), 105. Elsewhere (p. 106) Parrinder comments that in interpreting 9.33 Muslim commentators "have let themselves be dominated by 4.157". On this verse N. Robinson comments, "There is not the slightest hint, however, that his death also lies in the future. On the contrary, given only this sūra, the assumption would be that it already lay in the past like John's", N. Robinson, "Jesus", *EQ*, 3:17b.

namely God's act of separating the soul from the body, or making someone die.⁹ In fact, Muslims often pray the concluding words of *sūrat al-a'rāf* (7) 126: *rabbānā aḥḥīḥ 'alaynā ṣabran wa-tawaffanā muslimīn*, "O our Lord, fill us with patience and *make us die* Muslims".

For the two verses where *tawaffā* is applied to Jesus, however, Muslim exegetes generally search for a secondary meaning of the term. Thus they reconcile these two verses with the doctrine of Jesus' escape from death. Modern translators follow them with amazing fidelity. Pickthall, for example, translates *tawaffaytanī*, "tookest me"; Yusuf Ali, "didst take me up"; Blachère, "m'as eu rappelé"; Arberry, "didst take me to Thyself"; Paret, "Du mich abgerufen hastest"; and Fakhry, "took me to yourself". Abdel Haleem, on the other hand, translates obliquely, but accurately, "You took my soul".

In this regard it is noteworthy that the second occurrence of *tawaffā* in relation to Jesus, *sūrat āl 'Imrān* (3) 55, precedes a reference to God causing Jesus to ascend to Him: "God said, 'O Jesus, I will make you die (*mutawaffika*), raise you up to me (*rāfi'uka ilayya*), purify you from those who disbelieved, and lift those who have followed you above the disbelievers until the Day of Resurrection, then you will all return to me" (Q 3.55a). According to this sequence, God indeed raised Jesus to heaven, but only after He first caused him to die.

With this insight we might then return to *sūrat al-nisā'* (4) 157–8. In verse 157, as mentioned above, the Quran denies that the Jews killed Christ. In verse 158(a) the Quran insists that instead *rafa'ahu Allāhu ilayhi*, "God raised him to Himself".¹⁰ In other words, precisely the same sequence of *sūrat āl 'Imrān* (3) 55 is implied: God (and not the Jews!) first made Jesus die, and then made him ascend to heaven.

2. Exegetical debates

i. *wa-lakin shubbiha la-hum*

Nevertheless, this is hardly the standard Islamic understanding of *sūrat al-nisā'* (4) 157–8. The great majority of classical exegetical traditions explain instead that someone other than Jesus was transformed to look like him and then died in his place, while Jesus was taken up to heaven alive, body and soul.¹¹ The

9 Thus Ibn Manẓūr (d. 711/1312) defines *tawaffāhu Allāh* as "*qabaḍ Allāhu nafsahu*", literally, "God seized his soul". The body is left behind as the soul is taken by God. Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-'arab*, ed. Muḥammad al-Sādiq al-'Ubaydī (Beirut: Dār Iḥyā' al-Turāth al-'Arabī, 1418/1997), 15:359.

10 The meaning of the verb *rafa'a* in Q 3.55 and 4.158 is clarified in light of Q 19.57, which reports that God raised Idrīs to a high place (*rafa'nāhu*). Presumably Idrīs here represents Enoch (cf. Gen. 5.24), who according to Jewish and Christian tradition was preserved from death. The name Idrīs, meanwhile, may be derived from Andrew, the cook of Alexander the Great who according to the Alexander Romance wins immortality in the Fountain of Youth. Regarding the ascension of Christ in the Quran, Rudolph suggests that the mention of a high place reserved for Jesus and Mary (Q 23.50) reflects the Christian doctrines of the Ascension and the Assumption. W. Rudolph, *Die Abhängigkeit des Qurans von Judentum und Christentum* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1922), 82–3.

11 Louis Massignon argues that this substitution theory, which is in no way obvious in the Quran itself, was inherited from the doctrine of radical Shii groups who maintained that

prevalence of this view might be illustrated through a survey of a select but diverse group of classical *tafsīrs*.¹² The early commentary *Tafsīr Muqātil*, for example, explains that the phrase *wa-lakin shubbiha la-hum* refers to the fact that the image (*sūra*) of Jesus was cast onto a man who had struck him named Judas (*yahūdihā*). Judas was therefore justly punished when, having received the image of Jesus, he was killed in Jesus' place.¹³

According to Abū Ja'far al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923) the *mufasssīrūn* are in agreement that Jesus did not die, that instead he ascended to heaven body and soul while someone else died in his place. Their principal disagreement is only whether God cast the image of Jesus on a number of people, from whom the Jews chose one to crucify, or whether God cast the image of Jesus only on one specific person. Ṭabarī reports two traditions which reflect the first opinion. One of them relates that on a day when Jesus was together with seventeen disciples (*hawāriyyūn*; cf. Q 3.52; 5.111, 112; 61.14), and the Jews came to the house where they were gathered, intent on killing him, all of the disciples received his image. The Jews then entered the room and, discovering the bewildering sight, declared, "Show us which one is Jesus or we will kill all of you". At this Jesus turned to the disciples and asked "Which one of you will win paradise for his soul today?" The faithful disciple who answered Jesus' summons retained the image of his teacher, while the others immediately regained their true appearance. This faithful disciple went out to the Jews, who took him and crucified him, while God took Jesus into heaven.¹⁴

Ṭabarī then reports nine different traditions which reflect the second opinion. The narratives therein are close to that in the tradition above, except that the faithful disciple receives the appearance of Jesus only at the moment that he volunteers to take Jesus' place. One such narrative shows particular midrashic creativity. A tradition on the authority of Ibn Ishāq relates that Jesus was with

their divine *imāms* only appeared to die, "la parcelle divine qui résidait en eux ayant été nécessairement soustraite à leurs assassins". L. Massignon, "Le Christ dans les évangiles selon Ghazali", *Revue des études islamiques* 6, 1932, 491–536, p. 525. Lawson ("The Crucifixion of Jesus in the Qur'ān and Qur'ānic commentary", 3, 29) refutes Massignon's theory, countering that the Shia accepted the suffering and death of their Imāms, and therefore would not be reluctant to accept the suffering and death of Jesus. He seems to miss, however, that Massignon is referring precisely to those extreme (*ghulāt*) Shii groups (such as the Khaṭṭābiyya) who rejected (apparently) the suffering and death of their Imāms.

- 12 For a more extensive description of both classical and modern Islamic exegesis on the crucifixion see B.T. Lawson, *The Crucifixion and the Qur'ān: A Study in the History of Muslim Thought* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2009). Therein Lawson expands on his earlier two-part article: "The crucifixion of Jesus in the Qur'ān and Qur'ānic commentary: a historical survey". Cf. also M. Fonner, "Jesus' death by crucifixion in the Qur'an", *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 29, 1992, 432–50.
- 13 Muqātil b. Sulaymān, *Tafsīr* (henceforth: *Tafsīr Muqātil*), ed. 'Abdallāh Muḥammad al-Shahāta (Cairo: Mu'assasat al-Ḥalabī, n.d.), 1:420, on Q 4.157.
- 14 Abū Ja'far al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān fī ta'wīl al-Qur'ān*, ed. Muḥammad 'Alī Bayḍūn (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1408/1988; the pagination of this edition follows the 30 equal-part division of the Qur'ān, although it is bound in 15 volumes. References in the present work are to part:page), 6:12–3, on Q 4.157. This tradition is on the authority of Wabb b. Munabbih.

thirteen disciples when he asked, “Who among you desires to be my companion in paradise by taking on my image before the people who will kill him in my place?” A disciple named Sergius¹⁵ called out, “I, O Spirit of God” (cf. Q 4.171).¹⁶ At this he acquired the image of Jesus, while Jesus first fell asleep and then was taken into heaven (thus the sequence of *mutawaffīka wa-rāfi‘uka ilayya* in Q 3.55 is explained). When the Jews finally burst into the room they were surprised to find Jesus, as they supposed Sergius to be, with only twelve disciples, and began to argue over the reason for this. This is the meaning, the tradition explains, of the statement in *sūrat al-nisā’* (4) 157: “Those who dispute over it are covered in doubt”. In other words, Christians are wrong to think that there were twelve apostles. There were originally thirteen, but one of them was crucified in the place of Jesus.

The Mu‘tazilī exegete Zamakhsharī (d. 538/1144), on the other hand, begins his analysis of this verse by putting it in the context of the larger passage (Q 4.152–7). He notes that the Jews’ claim to have killed Jesus is only one of the accusations which the Quran raises against them. Yet while Zamakhsharī acknowledges the larger context of the Quran’s reference to the crucifixion, his approach to the question of Jesus’ death is essentially no different. Again he explains *wa-lakin shubbiha la-hum* with traditions about a person who was transformed into the image of Jesus and killed in his place. The first such tradition is precisely like that which Ṭabarī reports, that one of Jesus’ faithful disciples volunteered to sacrifice himself for his teacher.¹⁷ The second tradition he reports is instead like that of *Tafsīr Muqātil*, according to which, on the contrary,

- 15 A name which is used idiomatically in both Muslim and Christian Arabic accounts for otherwise unnamed Christian figures. It appears, for example, in the Christian anti-Muslim polemical letter of Kindī for the renegade monk (otherwise known as Bahīra or Buḥayra) who instructs Muḥammad. See *Risālat ‘Abdallāh b. Ismā‘īl al-Hāshimī ilā ‘Abd al-Masīḥ b. Ishāq al-Kindī wa-risalat ‘Abd al-Masīḥ ilā ‘l-Hāshimī* (Damascus: al-Takwīn li-l-Ṭibā‘a wa-l-Nashr wa-l-Tawzī‘), 2005 (reprint of ed. A. Tien, London: n.p., 1880), 75; trans. *The Apology of al-Kindy*, trans. W. Muir (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1887), 70.
- 16 Ṭabarī, 6:12–3, on Q 4.157. Ṭabarī’s contemporary, the Shii exegete Qummī (d. after 307/919), relates a similar narrative on the authority of the fifth imām Muḥammad Bāqir:

Jesus gathered his companions on the night on which God raised him up to Himself. The twelve men gathered together in the evening. [God] had Jesus enter a house and come out to them from a spring in a corner of the house. He was shaking his head off of water and he said, “God has revealed to me that He will raise me up to Him this hour, that He will purify me of the Jews [cf. Q 3.55]. Upon which of you should he cast my likeness? Who will be killed and die and be raised to my level?” One of them said, “I will, O spirit of God”.

Al-Qummī, *Tafsīr* (Beirut: Mu‘assasat al-‘Ilāmī li-l-Maṭbū‘āt, 1412/1991), 1:111, on Q 3.55.

- 17 According to Zamakhsharī, “When God informed [Jesus] that He would raise him to heaven and purify him [cf. Q 3.55] from the followers of the Jews, he said to his companions: ‘Who would like to have my likeness cast on him, to be killed and crucified, and to enter paradise?’ One of them said, ‘I would’. [Jesus’] likeness was cast on him and he was killed and crucified.” Zamakhsharī, *Al-Kashf ‘an ḥaqā’iq ghawāmiḍ al-tanzīl*, ed. Muḥammad Ḥusayn Aḥmad (Cairo: Maṭba‘at al-Istiḳāma, 1365/1946), 1:586–7, on Q 4.153–9.

Jesus' nemesis was thereby punished for his treachery: "[The Jews] went into the house of Jesus and Jesus was raised up while his likeness was cast on the betrayer. They took him and killed him thinking that he was Jesus".¹⁸

If this latter tradition is, in its narrative details, directly opposed to the "faithful disciple" tradition, it nevertheless emerges from precisely the same exegetical instinct, namely haggadic speculation.¹⁹ Accordingly Zamakhsharī appends to it a note which, like that at the end of the Ṭabarī tradition above, explains the statement in *sūrat al-nisā'* (4) 157, "Those who dispute over it are covered in doubt". Once the betrayer of Jesus was taken away and crucified, Zamakhsharī relates:

Some of [the disciples] said, "He is a god and it was not right to kill him". Some of them said, "He was killed and crucified". Some of them said, "If that was Jesus then where is our companion?" and "If that was our companion then where is Jesus?" Some of them said, "He was raised to heaven". Some of them said, "The face was the face of Jesus but the body the body of our companion".²⁰

Ibn Kathīr (d. 774/1373), like Zamakhsharī, presents *sūrat al-nisā'* (4) 157 in the larger context of Jewish transgressions. If anything Ibn Kathīr is more hostile to the Jews (He comments, "May God's curses, insults, anger, and punishment be upon them"²¹). Yet Ibn Kathīr's commentary on this verse follows the same haggadic method; he develops a narrative to identify what is unclear (*tabyīn al-mubham*) in the passage at hand. Thus Ibn Kathīr reports that on a Friday afternoon the Jews surrounded the house where Jesus was staying with twelve (or thirteen, or seventeen) of his disciples. Jesus asked them, "Which of you will have my likeness cast on him and be my friend in paradise?" When one of his young disciples agreed, an opening appeared in the ceiling of the house. Jesus fell asleep and was lifted up through it into heaven.²²

A second tradition explains that after Jesus disappeared through a hole in the ceiling, the Jews took the young disciple who had volunteered to die in the place of Jesus, "killed him and crucified him".²³ That is, Ibn Kathīr's tradition follows

18 Ibid., 1:587, on Q 4.153–9.

19 Zamakhsharī also turns to grammatical considerations in his analysis of this verse. Thus he asks what the subject understood in the passive *shubbiha* is. If it is Jesus (who is named at the beginning of Q 4.157), he explains, then the phrase *shubbiha lahum* would mean that Jesus was made to look like someone and not that someone was made to look like him, which would make a nonsense of the substitution narratives. Therefore, Zamakhsharī concludes, it can only be the pronoun *hum* ("them") in the prepositional phrase *lahum*, or the pronoun *hu* ("him") in the earlier phrase *inna qatalnāhu*, i.e. the substitute who was in fact killed. If the former, then the phrase *shubbiha lahum* would mean, "But they became uncertain" (he offers as a parallel the statement *khuyyila ilayhi* "it seemed to him"). If the latter, this phrase would mean "But they became uncertain of whom they killed". Zamakhsharī, 1:587, on Q 4.153–9.

20 Zamakhsharī, 1:587, on Q 4.153–9.

21 Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr*, ed. Muḥammad Bayḍūn (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 1424/2004), 1:550, on Q 4.156–9.

22 Ibid., 1:550–1, on Q 4.156–9.

23 Ibid.

precisely the sequence of the Quran's phrase *mā qatalūhu wa-mā ṣalabūhu*, despite the fact that death usually follows crucifixion, not vice versa.

This tradition then provides a different explanation of the phrase "Those who dispute over it are covered in doubt". It relates that after Jesus disappeared his followers divided into three groups, and continues:

One group said, "God was among us and then ascended to heaven". These are the Jacobites. One group said, "The son of God was among us and then God raised him to Himself". These are the Nestorians. One group said, "A servant of god and His messenger was among us and then God raised him to Himself". These are the Muslims. Then the two unbelieving sects prevailed against the Muslims and killed them. Islam remained eradicated until God sent Muḥammad – God's blessing and peace be upon him.

Thus *sūrat al-nisā'* (4) 157 is explained with heresiography, as it is connected (anachronistically) with the origin of two of the three principal Christian sects in the medieval Islamic world. At the same time the exegesis of this verse becomes an occasion to account for a troublesome point in Islamic salvation history. According to that history Jesus and his disciples were Muslims, yet Christians, who claim to have inherited their religion from those disciples, know nothing of this. The tradition above explains why: the first Christians themselves exterminated the Muslim disciples of Jesus. Ibn Kathīr adds that this tradition has a valid *isnād* from Ibn 'Abbās.

With this he turns to a third tradition, this one on the authority of Wahb b. Munabbih (d. c. 110/728), a scholar known (and reviled) for reporting narratives from Jews and Christians. In fact, this tradition follows roughly the Gospel accounts of the Passion. When Jesus learns of the plot against him, he gathers his disciples (*ḥawāriyyūn*), serves them food, and washes their hands. Later Jesus prays to God but the disciples fall asleep. Simon denies Jesus three times in front of the Jews, while an unnamed disciple makes a deal to betray Jesus for the sum of 30 dirhams. When the Jews seize Jesus they begin to whip him and taunt him with the words, "Did you bring the dead to life, cast out demons, heal the possessed? Can you not save yourself from this cord?"²⁴ The Jews then spit on Jesus, attach thorns to his head and bring wood to crucify him. Only at this point does the Wahb tradition differ notably from the Gospel accounts. God raises Jesus to Himself while the Jews crucify *mā shubbiha lahum* (Q 4.157). Jesus later finds Mary and the woman whom he had healed of demonic possession stricken with grief. He asks them: "For whom do you cry?" They said, 'For you!' He said, 'God has raised me to Himself. Nothing but good has taken place to me'.²⁵ Ibn Kathīr concludes, "This is a very unusual (*gharīb*) narrative (*siyāq*)".²⁶

A fourth tradition, this time on the authority of Ibn Iṣḥāq, explains that at the time of the crucifixion a cruel king named David ruled over the Israelites. Jesus had thirteen, not twelve, disciples. One of them, Sergius, received the image of

24 Ibid., 1:552, on Q 4.156–9. The Quran does not include exorcisms in the catalogue of miracles it attributes to Jesus; see Q 3.49; 5.110.

25 Ibid.

26 Cf. the version of the same *ḥadīth* in Ṭabarī, 6:12–3, on Q 4.157.

Jesus and was crucified in his place.²⁷ A fifth tradition also relies on the authority of Ibn Ishāq but provides the motif of the betrayer punished. Here Ibn Ishāq (who begins, “A Christian who became a Muslim told me. . .”) reports that Judas received the image of Jesus and was taken to be crucified. When he was seized by the Jews he called out continuously, “I am not the one you seek. I am the one who pointed him out to you!”²⁸

ii. *tawaffā*

The section above is meant essentially as an exposé of the standard view of the crucifixion among classical Muslim exegetes, namely that Jesus was raised body and soul to heaven while another was crucified in his place. That this view appears with exegetes of diverse eras, methodologies, and doctrinal affiliations reflects its wide acceptance. Indeed the differences between these exegetes extend only to the details of the narratives they favour (e.g. whether a disciple or a betrayer received the image of Jesus, or whether one or all of the disciples received his image) and do not concern the doctrine that those narratives are intended to illustrate. The views of the exegetes on the quranic term *tawaffā*, as it applies to Jesus, are likewise shaped around this doctrine.

Thus *Tafsīr Muqātil* accepts that *tawaffā* refers to God causing a human to die, but he insists that the Quran uses it for Jesus only in reference to his death in the end times, after his return to earth. To this end *Tafsīr Muqātil* argues that the relevant passage in *sūrat āl ‘Imrān* (3) 55 should be read, as it were, backwards. The Quran has God say to Jesus, “I will make you die and then raise you to me”, but *Tafsīr Muqātil* comments, “This phrase is a *hysteron proteron* (*taqdīm*), since it means, ‘I will raise you to me from this world and then make you die after you come down from heaven in the time of al-Dajjāl’.”²⁹

With Ṭabarī it becomes clear that the issue was not this simple for most of the *mufasssirūn*. Some interpreters, Ṭabarī notes, are of the opinion that when the Quran applies *tawaffā* to Jesus it refers not to death but to sleep.³⁰ It is this interpretation which explains the curious detail in the narratives on *sūrat al-nisā’* (4) 157–8 cited above, that Jesus fell asleep before God took him into heaven. According to a second opinion, however, *tawaffā* – when it applies to Jesus – is synonymous instead with *qabaḍa*, “to seize”; that is, with this term the Quran is not referring to Jesus falling asleep before God took him into heaven, but rather to the act of God taking Jesus into heaven, or to the moment when God took hold of Jesus before raising him to heaven.³¹

These two views of *tawaffā*, of course, redound to precisely the same doctrine about Jesus. In both cases the interpreters are eager to prove that the presence of the verb *tawaffā* can be reconciled with the doctrine that Jesus did not die, that he was taken body and soul into heaven, whence he will return.³² The only

27 Ibn Kathīr, 1:553, on Q 4.156–9.

28 Ibid.

29 *Tafsīr Muqātil*, 1:279, on Q 3.55.

30 Ṭabarī 3:289, on Q 3.55.

31 Ṭabarī 3:290, on Q 3.55.

32 Thus in support of the first opinion Ṭabarī cites a *ḥadīth* (on the authority of al-Ḥasan b. ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib) in which the Prophet tells the Jews, “Jesus did not die. He is

difference is how that reconciliation is achieved. One group of interpreters do so by associating *tawaffā* with Jesus falling asleep before he ascended to heaven, while others do so by associating *tawaffā* with the ascension itself (and putting it in apposition with the verb *rafaʿa* in Q 3.55).

Still Ṭabarī also cites a third view, that *tawaffā* – even in the case of Jesus – can only mean “to make die”. Most traditions that reflect this view reconcile it, as *Tafsīr Muqātil* does, with the doctrine of Jesus’ eschatological return.³³ If in *sūrat āl ʿImrān* (3) 55 *tawaffā* appears before Jesus’ ascension, then this verse must be read with *hysteron proteron* or *taqdīm al-muʾakhhkar*. Yet Ṭabarī also notes that some scholars concede Jesus did indeed die. One tradition to this effect insists that he was dead for three hours (another version has seven hours).³⁴

In the end, however, Ṭabarī declares his support for the second view, that *tawaffā* refers in the Quran to God taking hold of Jesus. He justifies this position by referring to the preponderance of *ḥadīth* in support of it, but there are other factors at play here. First, for Ṭabarī the doctrine of Jesus’ eschatological return is beyond any doubt. This leads him to reason, in light of quranic passages which imply that a person can only die once (cf. Q 6.60; 19.33), that Jesus must have been preserved from death. In other words, if Jesus is to return in the eschaton to finish his life and die, then the view that Jesus has already died must perforce be rejected. Second, Ṭabarī frequently professes his belief in a literal reading of the Quran and his suspicion of those who would violate its apparent meaning for ulterior motives. This means that he is suspicious of grammatical devices such as *hysteron proteron*, which is used here to keep the standard meaning of *tawaffā* even when denying the death of Jesus. Thus Ṭabarī arrives at the position – perhaps awkward for a self-professed literalist – that *tawaffā* does not mean *tawaffā*, and that Jesus did not die.

The question of *tawaffā* appears considerably less problematic in Zamakhsharī’s commentary. Zamakhsharī glosses the phrase *innī mutawaffīka*

going to return to you before the Day of Resurrection”. Ṭabarī 3:289, on Q 3.55.

In support of the second opinion, Ṭabarī cites a tradition on the authority of the Jewish convert Kaʿb b. al-Aḥbār, that when Jesus was distraught by the opposition against him God comforted him with the message that he would be raised, and added: “The one whom I raise to Myself is not dead. I will send you forth against *al-ʿawar al-dajjāl* and you will kill him. After that you will live 24 more years and then I will make you die”. Ibid., 3:290. Again Ṭabarī notes in support of this opinion a prophetic *ḥadīth*, according to which the Prophet declared, “How can a community of which I am its origin and Jesus its end perish?” Ibid. Later Ṭabarī reports a related *ḥadīth* (on the authority of Abū Hurayra) in which the Prophet explains: “I am the one who is closest to Jesus the son of Mary because there was no prophet between us and because he is the *khalīfa* (“successor”) of my community. He will descend”. Ibid., 3:291.

33 Ṭabarī cites three traditions which explain that while *tawaffā* refers to the death of Jesus, the Quran intends his death in the end times. One such tradition relates that Jesus will return as “a just arbiter and a righteous Imām, who will strike the Cross, kill the swine, pour forth money and combat all people for Islam, until in his era God will have annihilated all of the other communities. In his era God will also annihilate the misleading, lying Christ, al-Dajjāl”. Ṭabarī, 3:289.

34 Similar reports can be found in Ṭabarī’s reports in his history. See Ṭabarī, *Annales (Taʾrikh)*, ed. M.J. de Goeje (Leiden: Brill, 1879–1901), 1:737–9.

wa-rāfi'uka ilayya of *sūrat āl 'Imrān* (3) 55 with a summary of the standard Islamic doctrine on the death of Jesus: "I will bring your appointed time to an end (*mustawfi' ajlaka*), which means I will keep the unbelievers from killing you, and sustain you until the appointed time that I have written for you, and make you die a natural death and not be killed by their hands".³⁵ Thus Zamakhsharī concludes that *tawaffā*, when it applies to Jesus, refers to the end of his time on earth but not to his death, for which reason he has no concern when Jesus elsewhere uses *tawaffā* in the past tense (Q 5.117).

The approach of Ibn Kathīr, meanwhile, is different from both Ṭabarī and Zamakhsharī and yet still shaped by the same doctrine. Ibn Kathīr notes a tradition – predictably on the authority of Wahb b. Munabbih – that on the day of the Crucifixion God made Jesus die for three days and then brought him back to life and raised him to heaven. Not surprisingly, Ibn Kathīr finds this unacceptable.³⁶ He follows instead those who accept that *tawaffā* means death, but insists that it refers to the death of Jesus in the end times. Thus he understands *sūrat āl 'Imrān* (3) 55 with *hysteron proteron*: while this verse reads *innī mutawaffīka wa-rāfi'uka ilayya*, he explains, it actually means *innī rāfi'uka ilayya wa-mutawaffīka*.³⁷ Ibn Kathīr's acceptance of a device that Ṭabarī rejects in this case reflects his method more broadly. To Ibn Kathīr, the *ḥadīth* which place the death of Jesus after his eschatological return to earth are revelation no less than the Quran.³⁸ Accordingly they are a reliable guide to interpreting the Quran, and can even justify reading the Quran backwards.

iii. Jesus and the eschaton

Still Ibn Kathīr is not alone in emphasizing the eschatological role of Jesus. Indeed it seems that the acceptance of this role is, for all of the *mufasssirūn* in the above survey, the most important factor in their exegesis of quranic passages on his death. These passages, however, make no mention of Jesus' eschatological role. In fact, the Quran never speaks plainly of Jesus' place in the end times, but only seems to allude to it in several places.

In *sūrat al-nisā'* (4) 159, after mentioning that God raised Jesus to himself (v. 158), the Quran adds: "Every one of the People of the Book will believe in him before his death. On the Day of Resurrection he will be a witness against them" (Q 4.159). If this verse appears to be a reference to the eschatological role of Jesus, its precise meaning is rendered ambiguous by the use of pronouns with no clear antecedent. The first half of the verse can be read to mean either that all Jews and Christians will believe in Jesus before they die,³⁹ or that all Jews and Christians will believe in Jesus before Jesus

35 Zamakhsharī, 1:366, on Q 3.55–7.

36 Ibn Kathīr, 1:350, on Q 3.55–8.

37 Ibid.

38 Thus Ibn Kathīr reports with approval a *ḥadīth* in which the Prophet declares: "Jesus did not die. He will return to you on the Day of Resurrection". Ibn Kathīr, 1:350, on Q 3.55–8.

39 This reading leads to various exegetical traditions according to which Jews and Christians, at the moment of their death, accept that Jesus is a Muslim prophet. Their belief, however, is too late to save them from damnation. Thus Zamakhsharī, for example, has the successor Shahr b. Ḥawshab report a conversation with al-Ḥajjāj

dies. This second reading supports the conclusion that Jesus will only die in the end times.⁴⁰ Qummī comments accordingly: “Jesus will come down to this world before the Day of Resurrection. All of the Jewish and Christian communities will believe in him before his death”.⁴¹

Meanwhile, in *sūrat al-zukhruf* (43) 61 the Quran, having referred to Jesus in verse 57, declares “He [or It] is knowledge for the [apocalyptic] Hour” (*innahu la-‘ilmun li-l-sā‘ati*). If the pronoun (*hu*) here is understood as Jesus, then the Quran might again be alluding to his role in the eschaton.⁴² Indeed this is the conclusion of most *mufasssīrūn*. *Tafsīr Muqātil*, for example, explains that with the phrase “knowledge of the Hour” the Quran means that the imminent coming of the end times will be known by the descent of Jesus from heaven upon a hill in Jerusalem.⁴³ The degree to which the classical *mufasssīrūn* agree that the Quran is alluding to Jesus’ eschatological role emerges in Ṭabarī’s polyvalent commentary. He reports twelve different traditions which explain that *sūrat al-zukhruf* (43) 61 refers to the descent of Jesus in the end times. Only two traditions report instead that this verse should be understood, “It is

(d. 95/714). Shahr describes al-Ḥajjāj’s complaint that when he kills Jews and Christians he does not see them profess faith in Jesus as a Muslim Prophet. Shahr continues:

I said: “When death arrives to a Jew the angels strike his back and his face and say, ‘O enemy of God, our prophet Moses came to you and you rejected him.’ He will say, ‘I believe that he is a servant and a prophet.’ They will say to the Christian, ‘Our prophet Jesus came to you and you claimed that He is God or the Son of God,’ and he will believe that he is the servant of God and His messenger, but his faith will not benefit him.” Al-Ḥajjāj had been reclining but now sat up straight, looked at me and said “Who told you this?” I said, “Muḥammad b. ‘Alī, b. al-Ḥanifiyya” [d. 81/700–1; the son of ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib]. He began to scratch the ground with his stick and said: “You have taken it from a pure source.”

Zamakhsharī, 1:588, on Q 4.153–9. In the following tradition Zamakhsharī has ‘Ikrima confess to [his master] Ibn ‘Abbās that when he cut off the head of one of the People of the Book he observed the man’s lips moving before he died. Ibid. See the similar traditions in Ibn Kathīr, 1:553–4, on Q 4.159.

As though to support this view, a quranic variant (attributed to Ubayy) has *maw-tihim* (“their death”) instead of *mawtihi* (“his death”). See Zamakhsharī, 1:588, on Q 4.153–9; *Mu‘jam al-qirā‘āt al-Qur’āniyya*, ed. Aḥmad ‘Umar and ‘Abd al-‘Āl Mukarram (Tehran: Dār al-Uswa li-l-Ṭibā‘a wa-l-Nashr, 1426), 2:179.

40 The explanatory parenthetical note in Paret’s translation: “Und es gibt keinen von den Leuten der Schrift, der nicht (noch) vor seinem Tode (der erst am Ende aller Tage eintreten wird) an ihn glauben würde”.

41 Qummī, 1:165, on Q 4.159.

42 Again variants are used to favour certain interpretations. One variant (attributed to Ibn ‘Abbās, Abū Hurayra and Mujāhid among others) reads *‘alam* (“sign”) for *‘ilm* (“knowledge”) and thus follows the exegetical traditions that the return of Jesus to earth will be a sign of the coming of the apocalyptic Hour. A second variant (attributed to Ubayy), however, reads instead *dhikr* (“reminder”), and thus suggests simply that Jesus reminded (or the Quran reminds) people of the Hour. See Zamakhsharī, 4:261, on Q 43.61; *Mu‘jam al-qirā‘āt al-Qur’āniyya*, 6:122–3.

43 *Tafsīr Muqātil*, 3:800, on Q 43.61.

knowledge for the Hour”, since the Quran contains “knowledge of the Hour” in its frequent warnings of divine judgement.⁴⁴

In line with the majority view, Zamakhsharī insists that *sūrat al-zukhruf* (43) 61 means that the Hour will not arrive (he explains that *‘ilm* here means *shart*, “precondition”) before Jesus returns to Earth, at which time he will kill al-Dajjāl, come to Jerusalem, lead the people in prayer (“according to the prayer established by Muḥammad – the blessing and peace of God be upon him”), kill pigs, break crosses, destroy churches and synagogues, and kill all Christians except those who believe in him as a prophet.⁴⁵

Ibn Kathīr, in his commentary on *sūrat al-nisā’* (4) 159 accordingly explains that Jesus will return to this world to kill al-Dajjāl and to eliminate all religions but Islam: “Christ will kill those in error, destroy crosses, and kill swine. He will enforce the *jizya*, meaning he will not accept it from any of the people of the religions. He will not accept anything but Islam or the sword”.⁴⁶ Later Ibn Kathīr concludes that this verse is a report of the manner in which Christ will punish the Jews “for their grave insults of him and his mother [cf. Q 4.156] and the Christians for the way they venerated him by claiming that he was something he was not, lifting him up in the face of [the Jews] from the station of prophethood to the station of lordship. He is far above what these people say”.⁴⁷ Similarly Ibn Kathīr insists that *sūrat al-zukhruf* (43) 61 refers to the return of Jesus to this world in the eschaton, noting how many important authorities (Abū Hurayra, Ibn ‘Abbās, Abū al-‘Āliyya, Abū l-Salām, ‘Ikrima, al-Ḥasan, Qatāda, Ḍaḥḥāk and others) provide *ḥadīths* that transmit this report from the Prophet himself.⁴⁸

iv. Conclusion

The prevalence among the *mufassirūn* of the view of Jesus as eschatological protagonist seems to explain their otherwise peculiar rejection of his death. Indeed there can be hardly any other reason to argue that while *tawaffā* refers to death on twenty-three occasions in the Quran, on the two occasions on which it is applied to Jesus it refers either to falling asleep or being taken to heaven. In any case neither of these latter two definitions seems credible. The idea of Jesus falling asleep seems ridiculous when it enters the midrashic traditions on Jesus and his disciples. The idea of Jesus being taken to heaven is already represented with the verb *rafā‘a* in both *sūrat āl ‘Imrān* (3) 55 and *sūrat al-nisā’* (4) 158.

Meanwhile, the traditions which purport to explain how Jesus escaped death hardly suggest that they come from an authoritative and early explanation of the Quran’s meaning. They are often in perfect contradiction with one another. Some traditions, with impressive *isnāds*, insist that a faithful disciple of Jesus was crucified in his place. Other traditions, with *isnāds* no less impressive, insist that it was instead his betrayer.

44 See Ṭabarī, 25:90–1, on Q 43.61.

45 Zamakhsharī, 4:261, on Q 43.61.

46 Ibn Kathīr, 1:553, on Q 4.159.

47 Ibid., 1:554.

48 Ibid., 4:120, on Q 43.57–65.

These contradictions are, one might say, a consequence of the Quran's allusive nature. The ambiguous language of *sūrat al-nisā'* (4) 157–8, which both denies that the Jews killed Jesus and affirms that God raised him to heaven, leads exegetes to speculate freely. The importance of Enoch (cf. Gen. 5:34) and Elijah (cf. 1 Kings 2:11) in Jewish and Christian eschatology proves how powerful such ambiguous references might be. It is presumably the ambiguity of *sūrat al-nisā'* (4) 157–8 that led Muslim scholars to connect the doctrine of Jesus' eschatological role with an insistence that he did not die. However, as Neal Robinson points out, there is no *a priori* reason to make such a connection.⁴⁹

It is worth noting, however, that the Qur'ān's language on Jesus is not eschatological *per se*. *Sūrat al-nisā'* (4) 159 refers to his role as witness on the Day of Resurrection, while *sūrat al-zukhruf* (43) 61 seems to describe him as knowledge (*'ilm*), or a sign (*'alam*) of the Hour or, if a minor emendation to the Cairo text might be entertained, knowing (*'ālim*) the Hour (but cf. Q 7.187). Still both of these verses allude to Jesus' place in the apocalyptic Hour (that is, in the final judgement), *not* in the end times, the final era of human history, that will precede it. Indeed none of the events which Jesus is said by the exegetes to accomplish in the eschaton – killing al-Dajjāl, leading believers in prayer, breaking Crosses, killing swine (and Christians), etc. – are mentioned in the Quran.

All of this leads one to suspect that the classical *mufasssirūn* had other reasons to emphasize the role of Jesus in the eschaton and, consequently, to deny his death. Those reasons, I believe, are connected to the sectarian milieu in which Islamic doctrine developed. For the eschatological traditions on Jesus are apologetically useful in two different ways.

First, these traditions have a distinctly anti-Christian effect. Thereby Jesus, after descending to Earth, will not only break all Crosses and kill all swine, but also, according to one tradition reported by Ibn Kathīr, he will compel all Christians to become Muslims, under penalty of the sword. This suggests that eschatology became an arena in which Muslim–Christian competition was played out. Of course, Jesus was anyway the central figure in Christian eschatology, and Christians had long before developed a detailed narrative of his feats in the end time. Indeed much of the material in Islamic exegetical traditions is a development of this Christian narrative. For example, the name of the Islamic anti-Christ, al-Dajjāl (or *al-masīḥ al-dajjāl*, “the deceiving Christ”) never appears in the Quran. It comes instead from Syriac *daggālā*, an adjective used for the anti-Christ by Ephraem and Pseudo-Methodius.⁵⁰ In other words, the Muslim exegetes used the material of Christian eschatology, even as they shaped it against the Christians themselves.

Second, by having Jesus so prominent in these traditions an anti-Shii effect is also achieved. At the heart of developing Shii doctrine was the role of the Twelfth Imām, *al-qā'im bi-l-sayf*, as the Mahdī in the end times. This does not mean that Jesus finds no role at all in Shii eschatology. As seen above,

49 “There is nothing to indicate that his future descent requires him to have been spared death on the cross.” N. Robinson, “Jesus”, 17b–18a.

50 Regarding which see A. Abel, “Al-Dadjdjal”, *EF*², 2:75–7.

the Shii exegete Qummī acknowledges his role. Yet it is telling that when Qummī comes to the report of the universal prayer of Jesus in Jerusalem, he adds: “He will pray behind the Mahdī”.⁵¹ Other Shii eschatological traditions describe how the Imām/Mahdī will exact vengeance on the Sunnīs for their crimes against the Prophet’s family.⁵² In response Sunnī eschatological traditions increasingly emphasized the role of Jesus in the eschaton. Indeed, some Sunnī traditions insist that there would be no other Mahdī but Jesus himself.⁵³

Thus Jesus became the Sunnī answer to the Shii Qā’im, and his preservation from death was accordingly emphasized. In other words, the doctrine that Jesus was saved from death (at the hands of the evil Jews) developed in the same way as the Shii doctrine that the Twelfth Imām was saved from death (at the hands of the evil Sunnīs).⁵⁴ In both cases the point is eschatology. Jesus and the Imām are saved from death for the sake of their role in the end times.

3. The quranic subtext

Thus the motivations of the classical *mufassirūn* in denying the death of Jesus are understandable. Less understandable is the affirmation of this denial by modern critical scholars. Indeed it has long been a standard line in critical scholarship that the Quran denies the death of Jesus.⁵⁵ Scholarly consensus on this opinion, it seems to me, is in part due to the prevalent method of studying quranic verses in isolation. This method, a sort of exegetical atomism, is largely inherited from the classical *tafsīrs* of Islamic tradition itself (although the much maligned genre of *qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā’*, “Stories of the Prophets”, is free of it). When it comes to the quranic passage on the Crucifixion, this method also has a deleterious effect.

Indeed, in *sūrat al-nisā’* (4) 157, the Quran itself seems to warn against atomism with the opening word *wā* (“and”). When this warning is heeded, and the larger pericope is appreciated, it becomes apparent that in this passage the Quran is in no way denying Jesus’ death. Instead, the Quran is using the Crucifixion as one example of Israelite infidelity. In this passage the Quran provides six

51 Qummī, 1:165, on Q 4.159.

52 See, for example, the traditions recorded by al-Shaykh al-Mufīd (d. 413/1022), *K. al-Irshād* (Beirut: Mu’assasat al-‘Allāmī li-l-Maṭbū‘āt, 1399/1979), 364 ff.

53 In a widespread *ḥadīth* on the authority of al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. 110/728). See Ibn Māja, *Sunan*, Kitāb al-fitan, 24, Bāb shiddat al-zamān, ed. Muḥammad Fu’ād ‘Abd al-Bāqī (Cairo: ‘Īsā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī, 1372–73/1952–53); cf. A. J. Wensinck, *Concordance et indices de la tradition musulmane* (Leiden: Brill, 1992), 7:80a–b. A discussion of this *ḥadīth* appears in Ibn ‘Asākir, *Sīrat al-sayyid al-Masīḥ*, ed. Sulaymān Mūrād (Beirut: Dār al-Shurūq, 1996), 273–8. Note also, under the same entry in Wensinck (7:80a–b), the various counter *ḥadīths* which insist that the Mahdī will be an offspring of Fāṭima.

54 Regarding which see, for example, Muḥammad b. Ya‘qūb al-Kulaynī, *Uṣūl al-kāfi*, “Bāb mawlad al-ṣāḥib” 1, n.e. (Tehran: Dār al-Uswa, 1418), 1:587.

55 This is so even in the work of scholars of contrasting ideologies, e.g. the Protestant missionary W. St. Clair Tisdall, *The Original Sources of the Qur’an* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1905), 142; the Dominican G. Anawati, “‘Īsā”, *ET*², 4:84a; and the contemporary scholar N. Robinson, *Christ in Islam and Christianity* (London: Macmillan, 1991), 115.

examples in all: worshipping the golden calf (Q 4.153), breaking the covenant (Q 4.155; cf. 5.13), disbelieving the signs of God (4.155; cf. 3.4), murdering the prophets (! Q 4.155; cf. 3.181), slandering Mary (Q 4.156; cf. 19.27–8), and claiming to have killed Jesus (Q 4.157). In other words, in the verse on the crucifixion the Quran intends to defend Jesus from the claims of the Jews, as it defends Mary from their claims in the previous verse.⁵⁶ Whether or not Jesus died is simply not the matter at hand.

Yet more importantly scholarly consensus on this question emerges from the prevalent method of reading the Quran through the lens of *tafsīr*. As Lawson puts it, “The point is that *tafsīr*, not the Qur’ān, denies the Crucifixion”.⁵⁷ That is indeed the point, and so it is peculiar to see Lawson elsewhere insist that most Western scholars have “ignored the Muslim exegetical tradition”.⁵⁸ On the contrary, the problem seems to be that Western scholars have relied altogether too much on the Muslim exegetical tradition. Indeed, if Western scholars do not have the piety of the classical Muslim exegetes, they nevertheless often share the same hermeneutic: a reliable reading of the Quran is to be achieved through a critical reading of Islamic exegesis.

The effect of this hermeneutic is further evident in the efforts of Western scholars to find a historical explanation for the Quran’s apparent denial of the crucifixion. It is, of course, Islamic exegetical tradition – not the Quran itself – which develops a historical context for the Quran, yet most Western scholars have faithfully followed this contextualization. Accordingly they have sought to explain one aspect of Islamic tradition, that the Quran denies Jesus’ death, through another aspect, that the Quran reflects the career of a man in western Arabia of the early seventh century. Accordingly these scholars have been on a never-ending hunt for a particular Christian sect that might have both reached that context and held docetic views. This method is reflected, for example, in the opinion of Henri Grégoire that the Quran’s statement on the crucifixion was Muḥammad’s concession to “certain docetic Monophysites”.⁵⁹ Joseph Henninger, meanwhile, suggests that Muḥammad was involved in an inter-monophysite struggle between the Severians (Severus of Antioch, d. 538) who held that Christ had normal human flesh, and the Julianists (Julian of Halikarnass, d. after 527) who held that his flesh was heavenly.⁶⁰ Of course, among the various Christological positions at the time it is that of

56 On this see G. Basetti-Sani, *The Koran in the Light of Christ* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1977), 169–73. See also R. C. Zaehner, who accordingly compares this passage to Philippians 2.7–9, in which Paul insists that God glorified Christ after the Crucifixion: “But he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, becoming as human beings are; and being in every way like a human being, he was humbler yet, even to accepting death, death on a cross. And for this God raised him high, and gave him the name which is above all other names”, R. C. Zaehner, *At Sundry Times: An Essay in Comparative Religions* (London: Faber & Faber, 1958), 213.

57 Lawson, “The Crucifixion of Jesus in the Qur’ān and qur’ānic commentary”, 2, 35.

58 *Ibid.*, 35.

59 Noted by Anawati, 4:84a; See H. Grégoire, “Mahomet et le monophysisme”, *Mélanges Charles Diehl* (Paris: Leroux, 1930), 1:107–19.

60 J. Henninger, *Spuren christlicher Glaubenswahrheiten im Koran* (Schöneck: Administration der Neuen Zeitschrift für Missionswissenschaft, 1951), 27–8.

the East Syrians (“Nestorians”) – and not that of their opponents the Jacobites/monophysites – that is most congenial to a docetic view of the crucifixion. Accordingly, Karl Ahrens finds instead a Nestorian influence on the crucifixion pericope.⁶¹ Denise Masson, meanwhile, turns to early docetic, gnostic Christian texts in his search for historical influence.⁶²

Other scholars, I hasten to add, reacted against the idea of reading this quranic passage as a chapter of Christian heresiography. In 1922 Wilhelm Rudolph argued that the Quran’s denial of Jesus’ death reflects instead Muḥammad’s particular idea that Prophets are always vindicated.⁶³ Richard Bell agrees with this view, and insists that there is no reason to think that Muḥammad encountered obscure Christian sects.⁶⁴ Even Joseph Henninger, who elsewhere has recourse to Christian heresies, comments that Muḥammad finds no place for the Crucifixion, because “das ‘Wort vom Kreuze’ ist ihm Torheit”.⁶⁵ Anawati argues that Muḥammad believed God would not let this sort of thing happen to a Prophet (and cites Q 22.49; 3.54 to this effect).⁶⁶ Yet the view that Muslim prophets are always vindicated hardly seems obvious from the Quran itself. Indeed the Quran insists, a mere two verses before its reference to the crucifixion (!), that the Israelites in fact have murdered prophets (Q 4.155: *bi-qatlihim al-anbiyā’a bi-ghayri haqq*).

Indeed the key to understanding the Quran’s reference to the crucifixion, it seems to me, is to appreciate the rhetoric of the larger passage in which it stands. That rhetoric is, above all, marked by anti-Jewish polemic. In this light Naṣr Abū Zayd comments, “Since [the reference to the Crucifixion] exists only in the context of responding to the Jewish claim, the discourse structure suggests it was denying the capability of the Jews to have done this depending on their own power. . .”.⁶⁷ Geoffrey Parrinder similarly appreciates this insight: “It is

61 K. Ahrens, “Christliches im Quran”, *ZDMG* 84, 1930 (15–68, 148–90), 153. As noted by Bell (*The Origin of Islam in Its Christian Environment* (London: Macmillan, 1926), 154), this theory was already suggested in the nineteenth century by G. Rosch, “Jesusmythen des Islam”, *Theologische Studien and Kritiken* 1, 1876, 409–54, 451.

62 Thus Masson notes the *Acts of John* 99, wherein the divine Christ appears with a great Cross of light while the human Jesus is being crucified, and declares, “It is not that wooden Cross which you will see when you go down from here; nor am I the [man] who is on the Cross”, English trans. K. Schäferdiek in *New Testament Apocrypha*, trans. R. Wilson (Cambridge: J. Clarke & Co., 1991), 2:185. He also refers to Ignatius of Antioch’s letter to the Smyraens (ch. 2): “Now, He suffered all these things for us; and He suffered them really, and not in appearance only, even as also He truly rose again. But not, as some of the unbelievers, who are ashamed of the formation of man, and the cross, and death itself, affirm, that in appearance only, and not in truth”, and to Irenaeus’ refutation (*Adv. Haer.* 1:24) of Basilides’ claim that Simon of Cyrene was crucified in the place of Christ. See D. Masson, *Le Coran et la révélation judéo-chrétienne* (Paris: Adrien-Maisonneuve, 1958), 330–1.

63 Rudolph, 82. Later (p. 18) Rudolph expresses dismay at Muḥammad’s view of the crucifixion, “Wer den Kreuzestod für eine Fälschung hält, hat von der Bedeutung Jesu nichts begriffen”.

64 See Bell, *The Origin of Islam*, 154–5.

65 Henninger, *Spuren christlicher Glaubenswahrheiten*, 32.

66 Anawati, 4:84.

67 N. Abu Zayd, *Rethinking the Qur’ān: Towards a Humanistic Hermeneutics* (Amsterdam: Humanistics University Press, 2004), 34.

important to study the context of this passage, which is that of the rejection of the messengers of God by the Jews, the first People of the Book".⁶⁸

For this same reason William Montgomery Watt argues that even a Christian might accept the Quran's statement on the crucifixion, "since the crucifixion was the work of Roman soldiers; and it is also true in a deeper sense, since the crucifixion was not a victory for the Jews in view of his resurrection".⁶⁹ Accordingly Kenneth Cragg argues that the emphasis of *sūrat al-nisā'* (4) 157–8 is not on the crucifixion itself but on the evil instinct of humans, who believed they could outsmart God by killing His messenger. Thus the phrase *shubbiha la-hum* does not mean that the figure of Jesus appeared to them, but rather that the event was made to appear other than it was; in other words, God outsmarted them (cf. Q 3.54).⁷⁰

Neal Robinson, apparently with Cragg in mind, responds sternly: "The attempt of some Christian apologists to circumvent the quranic denial of the crucifixion is disingenuous in the extreme. If the intention of 4.157–9 had been to indicate that it was God or the Romans and not the Jews who crucified Jesus this would surely have been stated explicitly".⁷¹ This, it must be said, is a peculiar statement on Robinson's part. The Quran does not always state things explicitly. In fact, it regularly speaks with allusions and references. What does the Quran state explicitly, for example, of the Prophet's wives, the Prophet's companions, or indeed of the Prophet himself? It would be nothing out of the ordinary, in other words, for the Quran to be speaking obliquely about the death of Jesus on the Cross in this passage. In fact, in a later publication Robinson seems to concede the validity of such an interpretation. In his *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān* article, "Jesus", he writes that the Quran's reference to the crucifixion might mean "that although the Jews thought that they had killed Jesus,

68 *Jesus in the Qur'ān* (London: Faber and Faber, 1965), 108. See also the similar opinion of H. Räisänen, *Die koranische Jesusbild* (Helsinki: Missiologian ja Ekumeniikan, 1971), 68. Lawson comments that within the larger passage the Quran's reference to the Crucifixion is "parenthetic and gratuitous", "The Crucifixion of Jesus in the Qur'ān and qur'ānic commentary", 2, 37.

69 W. M. Watt, *Muslim-Christian Encounters* (Routledge: London, 1991), 22. Similarly O. Carré argues for "la lecture non docétiste de la crucifixion du Coran et de l'élévation corps et âme de Jésus, et également, des martyrs", O. Carré, "À propos du coran sur quelques ondes françaises actuelles", *Arabica* 53, 2006, 353–81, 363. The approach of Masson is different. He proposes that the Quran is insisting that the divine nature of Christ was untouched by death: "Les hommes, en le faisant mourir, ont fait mourir, en effet, le corps dans lequel s'était incarné le Verbe éternel et immuable", Masson, 330.

70 K. Cragg, *Jesus and the Muslim* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1985), 168. Cragg argues that the deeper meaning of this passage is missed by Muslim commentators who bring religious dogmas to their reading of the Quran: "Islamic convictions about Jesus and the Cross have never simply been those of mere investigators dealing with evidence. They have been those of believers persuaded already by theology . . . Historicity is involved inextricably with the larger theme of what ought to be", p. 178. Elsewhere Cragg approvingly quotes Muḥammad Kāmil Husayn, author of *City of Wrong*, who remarks, "The idea of a substitute for Christ is a very crude way of explaining the Qur'ānic text", Cragg, 175. M. K. Ḥusayn, *City of Wrong*, trans. K. Cragg (Amsterdam: Djambatan, 1958), 222.

71 N. Robinson, *Christ in Islam and Christianity*, 115.

Muslims should not think of him as dead because, from the Qur'ānic perspective, he is alive with God like the martyrs of Uḥūd (q 3.169)".⁷²

If Robinson here acknowledges that the Quran does not deny the death of Jesus, his explanation of the Quran's language still seems to me imprecise. The Quran has nothing to say about Jesus being alive with God in heaven, as it does about the martyrs (Q 3.169; cf. Q 2.154; 3.157; 4.74; 9.111; 47.4–6). That is, the case of Jesus is not simply a reflection of the Quran's teaching on martyrdom. Instead it is a carefully measured example intended to illustrate two themes.

The first theme is Jewish infidelity and perfidy. The Quran repeatedly presents the Jews as killers of the Prophets. In *sūrat al-baqara* (2) 91, the Quran challenges those Jews who claim to believe, "So why did you kill the Prophets of God before you believed?" Elsewhere (Q 5.70), the Quran relates, "We made a covenant with the Israelites and sent messengers to them. But as for those messengers who brought them something they did not desire, [the Israelites] rejected some of them and killed others" (cf. Q 3.21, 112, 181, 183; 4.155). In other words, the Quran not only leaves open the possibility that Jesus died on the Cross, it uses his death on the Cross as a paradigmatic example of Jewish infidelity, the primary theme of the larger passage in which the reference to the crucifixion appears (Q 4.153–9). At the same time the Quran makes the death of Jesus an example of divine control over human actions. As verse 54 of *sūrat āl 'Imrān* puts it, "They schemed and God schemed. God is the best of schemers".

The second theme is divine control over life and death. Indeed it seems to me that the Quran uses the transitive verb *tawaffā* to teach just this point. Humans can no more take a human life than they can create one. God creates life and He takes life away.⁷³ This is why the Quran tells the believers in *sūrat al-anfāl* (8) 17 (a verse traditionally applied to the battle of Badr): "You did not kill them. God killed them". Still more explicit is *sūrat āl 'Imrān* (3) 145: "No one can die except by God's permission". Elsewhere the Quran uses the death of Jesus (and Mary) as a paradigmatic example to this effect, when it asks, "If God desired to take the life (*yuhlik*) of Jesus the Son of Mary, and his mother, and everyone on earth, who could resist Him?" (Q 5.17). Thus the Jews who claim to have killed Jesus in *sūrat al-nisā'* (4) 157 are twice in error. They both schemed against the Messenger of God and arrogated to themselves God's power over life and death.

Meanwhile, it is worth noting that when the Quran uses the crucifixion as a paradigmatic example of Jewish perfidy it is in close conversation with Christian tradition. Indeed one of the fundamental *topoi* of the New Testament is the

72 N. Robinson, "Jesus", *EQ*, 3:19a. A similar development in Robinson's thought is evident with regard to the term *tawaffā*. In *Christ in Islam and Christianity* (p. 125) Robinson insists, "Although death is normally a concomitant [to *tawaffā*] there is no reason why there should not be exceptions". In his *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān* article (3:18b), however, he comments, "There is a *prima facie* case for construing God's words to Jesus to mean that he was going to cause him to die and raise him into his presence".

73 The importance of this theological point is similarly evident in the Gospel of John. The power of Jesus to take and restore his own life is a sign of his divine nature: "The Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me; I lay it down of my own free will" (John 10.17–8a).

exaltation of Jesus above the scheme of the Jews. For this reason the Synoptic Evangelists have Jesus quote Psalm 118.22–3: “The stone which the builders rejected has become the cornerstone” (Matt. 21.42; Mark 12.10; Luke 20.17). Again this line is quoted in Acts of the Apostles, this time by Peter, while standing in front of the Sanhedrin with a man whom he has cured. Here, in fact, Peter makes it explicit that the “builders” of Psalm 118.22 are the Jews who schemed against Jesus: “You must know, all of you, and the whole people of Israel, that it is by the name of Jesus Christ, the Nazarene, whom you crucified, and God raised from the dead, by this name and by no other that this man stands before you cured. This is the stone which you, the builders, rejected but which has become the cornerstone” (Acts 4.10–1).

Peter’s speech is itself a recapitulation of a speech he makes before the Jews in the previous chapter, wherein he declares: “It was you who accused the Holy and Upright One, you who demanded that a murderer should be released to you while you killed the prince of life. God, however, raised him from the dead, and to that fact we are witnesses” (Acts 3.14–5). Later in Acts, meanwhile, Stephen will likewise stand before the Sanhedrin and, condemning Jewish infidelity, ask them, “Can you name a single prophet your ancestors never persecuted? They killed those who foretold the coming of the Upright One, and now you have become his betrayers, his murderers” (Acts 7.52). Indeed, to a great extent, the first section of the Book of Acts (1–8) is the story of the triumph of Jesus over the Jews.

The sequence of *sūrat al-nisā’* (4) 157–8 suggests precisely this theme. The Jews boast of killing Jesus⁷⁴ when the event was in fact determined by God (Q 4.157), who raised Jesus in triumph (Q 4.158). Yet in this light the most important verse is the one that follows (Q 4.159), in which the Quran declares: “Every one from the People of the Book will believe in him before his death. On the Day of Resurrection he will be a witness against them”. While the *mufasssīrūn* conclude that the Quran makes Jesus a judge of both Jews and Christians in this verse, the fact that the entire pericope (Q 4.153–9) is anti-Jewish suggests that the Quran is referring in particular to Jesus, risen from the dead, as a witness against his murderers.

This idea, *mutatis mutandis*, is again consistent with a biblical theme: the Son of Man as apocalyptic judge (See, e.g. Matt. 25.31–46; John 5.26–7). Indeed the Gospel authors make Jesus above all a judge against Israel. Matthew has Jesus declare in front of the judges of the Sanhedrin, “I tell you that from this time onward you will see the Son of man seated at the right hand of the Power and coming on the clouds of heaven” (Matt 26.64b; cf. Mark 14.62; Luke 22.69; thus Revelation 1.13; 14.14; cf. also Psalm 110.1 and Daniel 7.13). John has Pilate place Jesus on the seat of judgement before the Jews (John 19.13). Even the apostles of Jesus will have the authority to judge the Jews: “Jesus said to them, ‘In truth I tell you, when everything is made new again and the Son of man is seated on his throne of glory, you yourselves will sit on twelve thrones to judge the twelve tribes of Israel’” (Matt 19.28). Thus

74 In this regard see also Luke 23.35: “The people stayed there watching. As for the leaders, they jeered at him with the words, ‘He saved others, let him save himself if he is the Christ of God, the Chosen One’”.

verse 159 of *sūrat al-nisā'* plays an important role in illuminating the quranic passage on the crucifixion. Its reference to the role of Jesus in the apocalyptic judgement suggests that the Quran is in conversation with the New Testament topos by which the risen Christ will judge his murderers.

Yet the subtext to this quranic passage is not limited to the New Testament. In particular, the Quran's allusions to the Jews speaking against Mary (Q 4.156) and to their claiming to have killed Jesus (Q 4.157) have no clear biblical precedent. Instead they seem to reflect more developed anti-Jewish rhetoric. In particular they reflect the tradition of anti-Jewish polemic in Syriac Christian writings, as exemplified in Jacob of Serūgh's (d. 521)⁷⁵ homilies (*mēmre*) against the Jews.⁷⁶ Jacob refers to the Jews as "a people who boast that they tied a man to the wood".⁷⁷ Elsewhere Jacob describes the sufferings that have met the Jews since the crucifixion and concludes: "While you made a speech, against the Lord, of the Crucifixion, He delivered against you a great speech of abandonment".⁷⁸

Meanwhile, and as Giulio Basetti-Sani has pointed out,⁷⁹ the Quran's rejection of Jewish claims also appears as a response to anti-Christian passages in the Talmud. *Sanhedrīn* 43a reports: "On the eve of the Passover Yeshu was hanged. For forty days before the execution took place, a herald went forth and cried, "He is going forth to be stoned because he has practised sorcery and enticed Israel to apostacy".⁸⁰ In that same Tractate the Talmud also slanders the virtue of Mary: "R. Papa observed, 'This is what men say, "She who was the descendant of princes and governors, played the harlot with carpenters"'.⁸¹ Thus the Talmud contains, in the same Tractate, a calumny against Mary and a report of the killing of Christ. Not coincidentally, the Quran contains, in the same Sūra – indeed in the same passage – a defence of Mary from Jewish calumny and a rejection of the Jewish claim to have killed Christ.

4. Conclusion

It thus emerges that the Quran is closely in conversation with Christian tradition in its passage on the crucifixion, a passage that is often described as an example of the stark differences between Islam and Christianity. The reason for this description, it seems to me, is the tendency of scholars to read the Quran through

75 On Jacob of Serugh see S. Griffith, "Christian lore and the Arabic Qur'ān: The 'Companions of the Cave' in *Sūrat al-Kahf* and in Syriac Christian tradition", in G. S. Reynolds (ed.), *The Qur'ān in Its Historical Context* (London: Routledge, 2008), 109–37; T. Kollampampil, *Salvation in Christ according to Jacob of Serugh: An Exegetico-Theological Study on the Homilies of Jacob of Serugh (451–521 AD) on the Feasts of Our Lord* (Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2001); T. Bou Mansour, *La théologie de Jacques de Saroug* (Kaslik, Lebanon: L'Université Saint-Esprit, 1993 and 2000).

76 See *Homélie contre les juifs*, PO 174, ed. and trans. M. Albert (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 1976).

77 *Homélie contre les juifs*, 44, l. 17.

78 *Ibid.*, 146, ll. 171–2.

79 Basetti-Sani, *The Koran in the Light of Christ*, 171.

80 *Seder Neziin*, trans. I. Epstein (London: Soncino, 1961), 3:281.

81 *Ibid.*, 3:725.

the lens of Islamic exegesis. If indeed the Quran intends, as the classical *mufasssirūn* report, that Jesus was taken up into heaven while his appearance was miraculously cast on one of his disciples (or else all of his disciples or else his betrayer), then it would certainly be in stark contrast with Christian tradition on the crucifixion. Yet the haggadic nature of such reports should warn critical scholars from using them as a lens through which to read the Quran.

This point might be taken still further. If *tafsīr* indeed provides an accurate explanation of the Quran's original, intended meaning, then nowhere should the explanation be clearer than in the case of the Crucifixion. If the Prophet Muḥammad announced to his companions that Jesus never died, but rather someone who was made miraculously to look like him died in his place, i.e. if he gave a historical account of the crucifixion which fundamentally contradicts that which Jews and Christians had been reporting for hundreds of years, then certainly such a revolutionary account – if any – would be well remembered and well preserved. But, quite to the contrary, the reports of the *mufasssirūn* are inconsistent and often contradictory. They have all of the tell-tale signs of speculative exegesis.

This strikes me as reason enough for critical scholars to read this quranic passage in light of earlier (i.e. Jewish and Christian) and not later (i.e. Islamic exegesis) literature. When the Quran is read in this light, it quickly becomes apparent that the passage on the crucifixion is fully in line with Christian anti-Jewish rhetoric. A major theme of this rhetoric, of course, is the portrayal of the Jews as prophet-killers. Accordingly the Quran, in *sūrat al-nisā'* (4) 155, accuses the Jews of "murdering the prophets". When the Quran then alludes to the crucifixion just two verses later, it means to give the cardinal example of just such a murder.