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THE END OF JESUS' LIFE ON EARTH IN THE QUR'ĀN

Louay Fatoohi*

Abstract: Muslim scholars have always accepted that Jesus escaped the attempt to crucify him, was raised to heaven, continues to live there and will return at the end of time. The Qur'ān is usually cited as the source of the first two beliefs, whereas the latter two have their main support in ḥadīth, although both sources are also cited in support of all these views. This paper focuses on what the Qur'ān says about Jesus' fate after the failed attempt to crucify him. It reviews the majority view before discussing how it started to be questioned in the late 19th century by scholars who offered alternatives. The article then focuses on the terms *tawaffī* and *raf'*, which the Qur'ān uses in describing God's intervention to save Jesus. My analysis confirms the centuries-long understanding of the Qur'ānic text that Jesus was raised alive to heaven. However, it disagrees with the traditional view that he is still alive, finding instead support for the alternative view of the minority of modern scholars that Jesus did not live a supernaturally long life, hence he is dead. The relevant Qur'ānic verses indicate that Jesus was raised alive to heaven and died there.

Keywords: *Qur'ān, ḥadīth, Jesus, Jesus' death, Jesus' descent, exegesis*

Muslim scholars over the centuries have consistently denied that Jesus died by crucifixion. This almost universal consensus is mainly based on verse 4:157, which unambiguously states the Jews “did not kill him, nor did they crucify him, but it was made to appear so to them,” with other verses and *aḥadīth* cited in support.¹ The only exception to this consensus is a handful of Ismā'īlī Shia scholars, the earliest of whom was writing as late as the fourth century. Their view is mainly driven by extra-Qur'ānic theological considerations, rather than based on analysis of the Qur'ānic text. The earliest non-Muslim sources that mention this issue also confirm that Muslims always believed that Jesus was not crucified.²

This article focuses on what the Qur'ān says about Jesus' fate after avoiding the crucifixion. This includes his death, as the Qur'ān is also unequivocal that Jesus, like every human being, was mortal. The paper starts by reviewing the traditional Muslim view before discussing

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¹ I have argued elsewhere that verses 3:54 and 5:110 confirm that Jesus escaped the attempt to crucify him. Louay Fatoohi, “The Non-Crucifixion Verse: A Historical, Contextual, and Linguistic Analysis,” *American Journal of Islam and Society* 40, no. 1-2 (forthcoming). *Aḥadīth* about Jesus' descent to earth are seen as confirming that he was not crucified. These *aḥadīth* will be discussed shortly.

² Fatoohi, “The Non-Crucifixion Verse.”

relatively recent alternatives. It then focuses on analysing the relevant Qur'ānic statements and the picture they paint of what happened to Jesus after the failed attempt to crucify him, contrasting that picture with the various views. It concludes that Jesus was raised to heaven where he continued to live, which is the majority view, but he later died naturally there and will not return to earth, in agreement with the minority view.

THE TRADITIONAL, MAJORITY VIEW: A LIVING AND RETURNING JESUS

The overwhelming majority of Muslim scholars argue that God saved Jesus from the crucifixion by taking him to live in heaven. The traditional belief also maintains that Jesus has continued to live in heaven and will descend to earth before the end of time. Although the Qur'ān is quoted in support of this view, the few verses that are quoted have no clear or direct reference to this belief. This interpretation of those verses is undoubtedly influenced by ḥadīth narratives that explicitly confirm Jesus' return. In this section, I will briefly review both sources.

Ḥadīth

Jesus' return is reported in various *aḥadīth*. They state Jesus will descend from heaven to put right what has gone wrong on earth, including killing al-Dajjāl. The main Sunni ḥadīth sources, including al-Bukhārī and Muslim, have no less than 15 *aḥadīth* of varying lengths and levels of detail about Jesus' second time on earth,³ most of which are transmitted by Abū Hurayra (d. 59).⁴

Books, some of which even make belief in Jesus' return an article of faith for Muslims, that consider a broader range of ḥadīth sources report a substantially higher number of narratives and transmitters. One work claims 28 Companions transmitted 60 such *aḥadīth*,⁵ while another takes the total number of these narratives to as many as 75.⁶

³ Muḥammad Harās, *Faṣl al-maqāl fī nuzūl 'Īsā wa qatlihi al-dajjāl* [The Decisive Statement on the Descent of Jesus and his Killing of the Antichrist] (Egypt: Dār al-Jīl, 1994), 24-46.

⁴ The other transmitters of these *aḥadīth* in the main Sunni sources are Jābir Ibn 'Abd Allah, 'Abd Allah Ibn 'Umar, Ibn Mas'ūd, 'Uthmān Ibn Abī al-'Aṣ, Mujammī' Ibn Jāriya, Ḥudhayfa Ibn Usayd al-Ghifārī, al-Nawwās Ibn Sam'ān al-Kilābī, and Abū Umāma al-Bāhilī.

⁵ 'Abd Allah Al-Ghamārī, *Iqāmat al-burhān 'lā nuzūl 'Īsā fī ākhir al-zamān* [Establishing the Proof of the Descent of Jesus at the End of Time] (Cairo: Al-Maktaba al-Azhariyya Lil-Turāth, 2006), 67.

⁶ Muḥammad Anwar Shāh Al-Kashmīrī, *Al-Taṣrīḥ bimā tawātara fī nuzūl al-masīḥ* [Pronouncement of what is Successively Reported about the Descent of the Messiah] (Aleppo: Maktab al-Maṭbū'āt al-Islāmiyya, 1992).

Shia scholars quote Sunni sources but have their own traditions as well.⁷ Some Shia traditions link the descent of Jesus to the return of al-Mahdī, with the latter leading the prayer and Jesus being among the congregation.⁸

Only after Jesus has returned to earth to complete his mission will he die. One narrative states he will die 40 years after killing the Antichrist,⁹ another is uncertain whether it is 40 years, months or days,¹⁰ and yet another suggests it may be 30 rather than 40 years.¹¹

While it is true that the overwhelming majority of Muslim scholars believe Jesus is still alive in heaven and will descend to earth at some point, there has never been consensus on this issue. This is unambiguously mentioned by the fifth-century H. Ibn Ḥazm al-Zāhirī (d. 456) in his book on *ijmā'*. While detailing issues on which scholars agree and disagree, he mentions that scholars have disagreed as to whether Jesus “would come before the Day of Resurrection or not.”¹² A century later, al-Qāḍī 'Iyāḍ (d. 544) identified those who did not accept that Jesus will return as being “some Mu'tazilīs and Jahamīs, and those who followed their opinion.”¹³ He explains that the rejectionist position stems from denying the authenticity of the concerned *aḥādīth*.

Even more interesting, three and a half centuries after al-Qāḍī 'Iyāḍ, al-Suyūṭī (d. 911) compiled in a book every *mutawātir* ḥadīth that was reported by “ten Companions or more, including all of its chains of transmission and wordings.”¹⁴ He listed in this collection, which he described as the first of its kind, 113 *aḥādīth*, but the narrative of Jesus' return is not included. It is not that Suyūṭī did not believe in Jesus' return; he did. This is confirmed in his reply, seven years after he compiled the *mutawātir aḥādīth*, to an enquiry he received concerning what religious law Jesus would follow when he returns.¹⁵

The Qur'ān

Turning to the Qur'ān, verses 4:159 and 43:61 have traditionally been interpreted as confirming Jesus' return. A third statement found in verses 3:46 and 5:110 is also linked to

⁷ Mu'assasat al-Ma'arif al-Islāmiyya, *Mu'jam aḥādīth al-imām al-mahdī* [Lexicon of the Aḥādīth of Imām al-Mahdī] (Qom: Mu'assasat al-Ma'arif al-Islāmiyya, 2007), vol. 3, no. 497-501, 311-318, no. 511, 339; Muḥammad Majlisī, *Biḥār al-anwār* [Seas of Lights] (Beirut Dār Iḥyā' al-Turāth al-'Arabī, 1983), vol. 14, 349-350.

⁸ Mu'assasat al-Ma'arif al-Islāmiyya, *Mu'jam*, vol. 4, no. 859, 499, vol. 5, no. 1235, 471.

⁹ Sulaymān Ibn al-Ash'ath Abū Dāwūd, *Sunan Abī Dāwūd* [Traditions of Abū Dāwūd] (Damascus: Dār al-Risāla al-'Ālamiyya, 2009), vol. 6, no. 4324, 378.

¹⁰ Abū al-Ḥusain Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim* [Authentic Aḥādīth of Muslim], ed. Muḥammad 'Abd al-Bāqī (Cairo: Dār al-Ḥadīth, 1991), vol. 4, no. 2940, 2258-2259.

¹¹ Mu'assasat al-Ma'arif al-Islāmiyya, *Mu'jam*, vol. 3, no. 497, 311.

¹² Ibn Ḥazm Al-Zāhirī, *Marātib al-'ijmā'* [Ranks of Consensus] (Beirut: Dār Ibn Ḥazm, 1998), 268.

¹³ Abū al-Faḍl 'Iyāḍ, *Ikmāl al-mu'lim bi-fawā'id Muslim* [Completing the Informer of the Benefits of Muslim] (Alexandria: Dār al-Wafā', 1997), vol. 8, 492.

¹⁴ Jalāl al-Dīn Al-Suyūṭī, *Al-Azhār al-mutanāthira fī al-aḥādīth al-mutawātirā* [The Scattered Flowers about the Successive Aḥādīth] (Cairo: Dār al-Fikr, 1996), 29.

¹⁵ Jalāl al-Dīn Al-Suyūṭī, *Al-Ḥāwī lil-fatāwī* [The Container of Rulings] (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 2000), 146-158.

Jesus' descent, although to a much lesser extent. As seen in my brief review below, none of these verses mentions that Jesus will return or is even still alive.

After denying the crucifixion of Jesus and stating he was raised by God to Himself, verse 4:159 goes on to say:

And there is none from the People of the Book but will surely believe in him before his death. And on the Day of Resurrection, he will be a witness over them (4:159).

This verse is understood as meaning the acceptance of Jesus by *every one of the People of the Book without exception*. Scholars are split on whose death is meant here. Some have taken it to mean the death of Jesus; therefore, a confirmation that Jesus is still alive and will return. Al-Ṭabarī (d. 310) attributes this opinion to Ibn 'Abbās (d. 68), Abū Mālik al-Ghifārī, al-Ḥasan (d. 110), Qatāda Ibn Dī'āma (d. 117) and 'Abd al-Raḥmān Ibn Zayd (d. 70).¹⁶ Most of those who advocate this opinion think the verse is talking specifically about all Jews and Christians who would witness Jesus' descent, hence the link to his return. This is the position of al-Ṭabarī.¹⁷

Al-Ṭabarī reports an alternative view on the authority of Ibn 'Abbās, Mujāhid (d. 104), 'Ikrima (d. 105), al-Ḍaḥḥāk (d. 102), al-Ḥasan (d. 110) and Ibn Sīrīn (d. 110), so this view was no less advocated than the first. The said death is interpreted as being of an individual of the People of the Book, thus it has nothing to do with witnessing Jesus at the end of time.¹⁸ In this case, the verse would mean, before his death, every Jew, although some scholars include Christians as well, would believe in Jesus. This is the view of al-Ṭabarī's contemporary grammarian al-Zajjāj (d. 311), who stresses the verse is making a statement about every one of the People of the Book, whereas only a small group of them would witness Jesus' descent. A possibility suggested by him that would link the verse to Jesus' descent but not to witnessing it is that every Jew and Christian before he dies would believe it is Jesus who will descend and kill al-Dajjāl.¹⁹ The pressure to read the belief in Jesus' descent into the verse is clear.

There is another relevant observation to make. Understanding the verse to refer to every one of the People of the Book would make this a case of belief by all members of a very large group of people. The Qur'ān repeatedly stresses, when a new messenger was sent, his people split into believers and disbelievers, with the latter usually the majority. The only exception is when Jonah was sent to over 100,000 people, who believed in his message (37:147-148). However, the Qur'ān does not provide further information about what that act of belief means and its circumstances. Restricting the traditional understanding of 4:159 to the Jews and Christians who would witness Jesus' second coming may be a way of dealing with this theological

¹⁶ Muḥammad Ibn Jarīr Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān 'an ta'wīl 'āy al-Qur'ān* [The Complete Elucidation of the Interpretation of the Verses of the Qur'ān], ed. 'Abd Allāh al-Turkī (Al-Ihsa: Dār Hajr, 2001), vol. 7, 663-667.

¹⁷ Ibid., vol. 7, 674.

¹⁸ Ibid., vol. 7, 667-671.

¹⁹ Abū Ishāq Al-Zajjāj, *Ma'ānī al-Qur'ān wa i'rābih* [The Meanings of the Qur'ān and its Parsing] (Beirut: 'Ālam al-Kutub, 1988), vol. 2, 130.

difficulty, although the concept of universal acceptance of a certain belief by any large group of people remains problematic.

Finally, verse 159 follows two verses that make clear statements about Jesus' fate. Verse 157 states he was saved from the attempt to crucify him and 158 adds that he was raised to God. If verse 159 referred to Jesus' return, one would expect it to make this reference equally unambiguously, but this is not the case.

The second verse that is linked to Jesus' return is 43:61, which is quoted here with two surrounding verses:

And if We willed, We could have made [instead] of you angels succeeding [one another] on the earth. And indeed, *innahu* (he/it is/will be) *la 'ilmun/la 'alamun* (knowledge/a sign) of the Hour, so be not in doubt of it and follow Me. This is a straight path. And never let Satan turn you away; indeed, he is to you a manifest enemy (43:60-62).

The immediate context for 43:61 does not suggest any connection to Jesus, let alone his return. This link presumes the singular masculine pronoun in verse 61 refers to Jesus' return or him, which is taken to imply his return,²⁰ as several *aḥadīth* state it is a sign of the Day of Judgement.²¹ Finding a context for this assumption itself requires presuming a direct link between verses 60-62 and the two verses that precede them and the two that follow them, the four of which talk about Jesus. This interpretation accommodates both readings of *'ilm* (knowledge) and *'alam* (a sign).

The alternative interpretation of the pronoun makes it a reference to the Qur'ān.²² This reading does not presume any connection between the verse and Jesus' return. It is also less accommodating of taking the verse as talking about a "sign" rather than "knowledge."²³

Finally, the Qur'ān's mention in verses 3:46 and 5:110 that Jesus would speak to people "in the cradle and when *kahlan* (middle-aged)" has been linked to his descent. This claim is based on understanding *kahlan* as meaning an age that is older than that when he was saved from the crucifixion and raised to heaven. It is concluded that Jesus would speak to people at this older age when he returns.²⁴ This view implies Jesus would have been alive for thousands of years by the time he returns, yet *kahlan* is understood to be a natural age range, not supernatural—such as one's 30s or from adulthood to old age. Exegetes have tried to deal with this difficulty by suggesting, when Jesus descends to earth, he would be in that age range.²⁵ This is a restatement of the Qur'ān describing Jesus speaking when *kahlan*, rather than an explanation of how he could be so when he returns. This is one reason why verses 3:46 and 5:110 are much less linked to Jesus' descent than 4:159 and 43:61. Al-Ṭabarī²⁶ reports this interpretation only

²⁰ Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān*, vol. 20, 631-633.

²¹ For example, Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, vol. 4, no. 2901, 2225-2227, no. 2940, 2258-2259.

²² Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān*, vol. 20, 633-634.

²³ Muḥammad Ibn 'Āshūr, *Tafsīr al-tahrīr wal-tanwīr* [The Interpretation of Verification and Enlightenment] (Tunisia: Al-Dār al-Tūnisiyya Lil-Nashr, 1984), vol. 25, 242-243.

²⁴ Fakhr al-Dīn Al-Rāzī, *Al-Tafsīr al-kabīr* [The Great Exegesis] (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr lil-Ṭibā'a wal-Nashr wal-Tawzī', 1981), vol. 8, 57.

²⁵ Muḥammad Al-Qurṭubī, *Al-Jāmi' li-aḥkām al-Qur'an* (Beirut: Mu'ssasat al-Risāla, 2006), vol. 5, 138.

²⁶ Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān*, vol. 5, 414.

on the authority of ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Ibn Zayd, al-Baghawī²⁷ (d. 516) and al-Rāzī (d. 604) link it only to al-Ḥusayn Ibn al-Faḍl (d. 282), whereas al-Zajjāj mentions it without attribution while expressing uncertainty about it.²⁸

MORE RECENT MINORITY VIEWS: A DEAD, NON-RETURNING JESUS

In the last century and a half, an increasing number of Muslim scholars have rejected the majority traditional belief that Jesus is still alive and will return near the end-time. They have argued that Jesus lived and died on earth. He never left the earth and did not live a supernaturally long life. This view questions the authenticity of the *aḥadīth* on Jesus’ return and claims they are *aḥād*, not *mutawātir*.

In the second half of the 19th century, the Indian reformer Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan was probably the earliest Muslim scholar to suggest Jesus was crucified but survived the crucifixion and later died a natural death.²⁹ Having a rationalistic approach to reading scriptures, Sayyid Ahmad Khan saw miracles as natural occurrences. Influenced by Western scholarship, he accepted the historicity of the crucifixion of Jesus. The non-fatal crucifixion theory was first proposed by German theologians in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. It is, however, rejected by most scholars as being highly unlikely, including on medical grounds.³⁰

One person that seems to have been influenced by Sayyid Ahmad Khan was his contemporary Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, the founder of the Ahmadiyya movement. He first held the traditional Muslim view but in 1891 he adopted Sayyid Ahmad Khan’s position that Jesus was dead and would not return,³¹ although claiming that God informed him that he was the awaited Messiah.³²

In the Arab world, the 19th century Egyptian reformist Muḥammad ‘Abduh popularised the view that Jesus died naturally. Prominent scholars who agree with this view, some of whom were ‘Abduh’s students, include Rashīd Riḍa, who documented his teacher’s views in his famous exegesis,³³ Muṣṭafā al-Marāghī,³⁴ Muḥmūd Shaltūt³⁵ and Muḥammad al-Ghazālī.³⁶ Unlike Ahmad Khan and those influenced by him, though, ‘Abduh and those who followed

²⁷ Al-Ḥusayn Ibn Mas‘ūd Al-Baghawī, *Ma‘ālim al-tanzīl* [Features of Revelation] (Riyadh: Dār Ṭība, 1989), vol. 2, 38.

²⁸ Al-Zajjāj, *Ma‘ānī al-Qur‘ān*, vol. 1, 412.

²⁹ J. M. S. Baljon, *The Reforms and Religious Ideas of Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan* (Lahore: Orientalia Publishers, 1958), 107-108.

³⁰ William D. Edwards, Wesley J. Gabel and Floyd E. Hosmer, “On the Physical Death of Jesus Christ,” *The Journal of the American Medical Association* 255, no. 11 (1986).

³¹ Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, *Jesus in India: Jesus’ Deliverance from the Cross & Journey to India* (Surrey: Islam International Publications, 2003), 57-58. Ahmad’s followers stress that he was not influenced by Sayyid Ahmad Khan but he changed his mind as a result of revelations. Abur Rahīm Dard, *Life of Ahmad: Founder of the Ahmadiyya Movement* (Surrey: Islam International Publications, 2008), 50.

³² Ahmad, *Jesus in India*, 12.

³³ Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍa, *Tafsīr al-manār* [The Exegesis of the Illuminator] (Cairo: Dār al-Manār, 1947).

³⁴ Aḥmad Muṣṭafā Al-Marāghī, *Tafsīr al-Marāghī* (Cairo: Muṣṭafā al-Bābī, 1946), vol. 6, 15.

³⁵ Maḥmūd Shaltūt, *Al-Fatāwā: Dirāsa li mushkilāt al-Muslim al-mu‘āṣir fī ḥayātihī al-yawmiyya al-‘amma* [The Rulings] (Cairo: Dār al-Shurūq, 2004), 51-70.

³⁶ Aḥmad Shalabī, *Al-Masīḥiyyah* [Christianity] (Cairo: Maktabat al-Nahḍah al-Miṣriyyah, 1988), 67-68.

him hold the almost universally agreed Muslim view that Jesus was never put on the cross. They maintain, after avoiding the crucifixion, he died naturally. Ibn ‘Āshūr also accepts that Jesus is dead but he argues he will still return, as stated in *ḥadīth*. He mentions the possibility that Jesus will have a special early resurrection, rather than the later universal resurrection of all other people and will descend to earth.³⁷

In the West, the late Mahmoud Ayoub is often quoted as one Muslim scholar who argued that Jesus was crucified and died.³⁸ The claim that Jesus was crucified is justified by interpreting 4:157 in new ways so its clear wording that Jesus was not killed or crucified is interpreted as meaning the exact opposite. The most popular such interpretation, which is suggested by Western scholars and theologians, is that the verse does not deny Jesus’ crucifixion but denies he was killed by Jews in the sense that they could kill him only because God allowed them to do so. In other words, it was God’s will that Jesus should die, rather than something that his executioners had full control over.³⁹ I have critiqued these claims in detail elsewhere.⁴⁰

After these quick reviews of the traditional interpretation and modern views of the fate of Jesus, I will start my analysis of the relevant statements in the Qur’ān.

THE CORE ISSUES

At the heart of the differences in opinion about how Jesus’ life on earth ended according to the Qur’ān lies the interpretations of two verbs that describe divine actions concerning Jesus after he avoided the crucifixion:

- *Wfy* (verbal noun *tawaffī/wafāt*): Did God “cause Jesus to die” or “take him”?
- *Rf* (verbal noun *raf*): What does God’s “raising” of Jesus mean?

Listed in the chronological order of their respective contexts, these two verbs appear in three verses in connection with Jesus’ fate, with my preferred interpretation in brackets:

When Allah said, “O Jesus! I am *mutawaffika* (taking you), *rāfi’uka* (raising you) to Me, and cleansing you of those who disbelieve, and setting those who follow you above those who disbelieve until the Day of Resurrection” (3:55).

³⁷ Ibn ‘Āshūr, *Al-Tahrīr wal-tanwīr*, vol. 3, 258-259.

³⁸ Mahmoud Ayoub, *A Muslim View of Christianity: Essays on Dialogue by Mahmoud Ayoub* (New York: Orbis Books, 2007), 156-183.

³⁹ Geoffrey Parrinder, *Jesus in the Qur’an* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 1995), 119; Suleiman A. Mourad, “Does the Qur’an Deny or Assert Jesus’s Crucifixion and Death?” in *New Perspectives on the Qur’an: The Qur’an in its Historical Context 2*, ed. Gabriel Said Reynolds (Oxon: Routledge, 2011), 356; Oddbjørn Leirvik, “Jesus in Modern Muslim Thought: From Anti-colonial Polemics to Post-colonial Dialogue?” in *Jesus Beyond Nationalism: Constructing the Historical Jesus in a Period of Cultural Complexity*, ed. Halvor Moxnes, Ward Blanton and James G. Crossley (New York: Routledge, 2014), 141; Ian Mevorach, “Qur’an, Crucifixion, and Talmud: A New Reading of Q 4:157-58,” *Journal of Religion & Society* 19 (2017): 12; Peter Laffoon, “Polyphony and Symphony: A Rereading of Q 4.157,” *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 32, no. 2 (2021): 177.

⁴⁰ Fatoohi, “The Non-Crucifixion Verse.”

I did not say to them other than that which You commanded me, “Worship Allah, my Lord and your Lord.” I was a witness over them as long as I was among them; but when *tawaffaytanī* (You took me), You were the observer over them. You are witness over everything (5:117).

Rather, Allah rafa’ahu (raised him) to Himself. Allah is invincible, wise (4:158).

The first verse is an address from God to Jesus before the crucifixion. The second is Jesus’ words to God from a dialogue between them after Jesus escaped the crucifixion. The third, which follows the one direct denial in the Qur’ān that Jesus was killed or crucified (4:157), is a statement confirming he was raised.

The two actions represented by *wfy* and *rf* and, accordingly, how Jesus’ life on earth ended are the focus of the rest of this paper. My analysis of *wfy* will show it could mean “took” or “cause to die,” so the term on its own is inconclusive. However, when the use of the verb *amūt* (die) in another verse on Jesus, 19:33, is considered, it becomes highly likely that the Qur’ān means he was “taken/seized,” rather than “caused to die,” by God. This conclusion will be re-enforced when looking at the verb *rf* and its close association with *wfy*.

When analysing Qur’ānic terminology, the hermeneutical principle that *the Qur’ān interprets itself* remains the best option when the Qur’ān provides enough relevant information.⁴¹ With the trilateral verbs *wfy* and *rf* each appearing tens of times in various forms in the Qur’ān, we have enough information to seek clear and reliable understanding of the general meanings of these terms and what they specifically mean in the case of Jesus.

DIFFERENT VIEWS ABOUT THE *WAFĀT* OF JESUS

Twenty-one occurrences of the verbal root *wfy* in the Qur’ān are unambiguously associated with death, but the term is also used twice in connection with sleep. This fact suggests the term has a broader meaning than just the end of a person’s life. In the two remaining instances, the Qur’ān uses *wfy* in the context of describing God’s intervention to protect Jesus from the attempt on his life, so most Muslim scholars have taken this word to mean something other than death in the case of Jesus. This conclusion is informed by other arguments as well, such as the denial of the crucifixion in 4:157 and the belief in Jesus’ return.

Al-Ṭabarī mentions some, such as the Successors al-Rabī‘ (d. 65) and Maṭar al-Warrāq (d. 125), who suggested the type of *wafāt* that Jesus experienced was the *wafāt nawm* (*wafāt* of sleep), as opposed to the *wafāt mawt* (*wafāt* of death). Yet he also mentions others, including Ibn ‘Abbās, who believe Jesus’ *wafāt* was that of death. Wahb Ibn Munabbih (d. 114) is reported to have been more specific about Jesus’ death, saying God made him die for three hours before raising him. One narrative that al-Ṭabarī attributes to this Successor closely

⁴¹ This interpretive method is hinted at in ‘Alī Ibn Abī Ṭālib, *Nahj al-balāgha* [The Way of Eloquence], ed. ‘Abd Allah Al-Ṭabbā‘ and ‘Umar Al-Ṭabbā‘ (Beirut: Mu’assasat al-Ma‘ārif, 1990), 337. The earliest exegetical work that mentions it seems to be Jār Allah al-Zamakhsharī, *Al-Kashshāf* [The Revealer], ed. ‘Ādil ‘Abd al-Mawjūd and ‘Alī Mu‘awwaḍ (Riyadh: Maktabat al-‘Bikān, 1998), vol. 4, 572. It states, “the best meanings [of verses] are those that the Qur’an points to.”

follows the Gospels' story, including Jesus having supper with the disciples and predicting that one of them would betray and surrender him to the Jews.⁴² However, those who speak of Jesus experiencing the *wafāt* of death still do not consider it to be the result of being crucified but an interventional action by God who saved Jesus from the attempt on his life by his Jewish enemies. Al-Ṭabarī mentions yet a third opinion by others who took the verb *wfy* to mean *qbd* (seize), which also indicates Jesus was raised to God alive, which he favours.⁴³

Three centuries later, in his voluminous exegetical work, the great scholar Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī quotes nine interpretations of *wfy* in his detailed commentary on 3:55.⁴⁴ The first of these, which he approves of as a "good interpretation," interprets "I am *mutawaffika*" as:

I will complete your lifetime, at which point I will atawaffāka. I will not allow them (the Jews) to kill you. Rather, I will raise you to My heaven, putting you near to My angels and protecting you against their ability to kill you.

He also agrees with the sixth of the nine views he reviews, which states *tawaffi* means "to take in full," meaning Jesus was raised in soul and body. Commenting on interpreting *tawaffi* as meaning "to seize" or remove from the earth and raise to heaven, he rejects the claim that this interpretation would make "and *rāfi'uka* to Me" a mere repetition of "I am *mutawaffika*":

His words "I am *mutawaffika*" indicate that *tawaffi* took place. This is a type that includes various forms, some of which are caused by death and others by raising to heaven. As He followed those words with "and *rāfi'uka* to Me", this specifies the form and is not mere repetition.

The opinions listed by al-Ṭabarī and al-Rāzī show the overwhelming majority of scholars over the centuries have maintained that *wfy* does not mean death in the case of Jesus. They have understood it along the lines of "take/seize."

One exception among the early scholars is the 5th-6th-century Andalusian jurist Ibn Rushd, who is the grandfather of the renowned philosopher Averroes. He admits the possibility that *wfy* may indicate Jesus' death.⁴⁵ The small minority of modern scholars that believes that Jesus is dead and will not return argues that *wfy* in the Jesus verses can *only* refer to death.⁴⁶

Modern Western scholars have suggested their Muslim counterparts have avoided understanding the *tawaffi* of Jesus as his death as a result of their other incorrect interpretation of verse 4:157 as denying that Jesus was crucified.⁴⁷ Some scholars have linked this supposed misinterpretation of the Qur'ān's statement on the crucifixion to what they claim to be a

⁴² Wahb Ibn Munabbih was known for his knowledge of *Isrā'īliyyāt* and Jewish and Christian scriptures. Shams al-Dīn Al-Dhahabī, *Siyar a'lām al-nubalā'* [Biographies of Famous Nobles], ed. Shu'ayb al-Arna'ūt and Muḥammad al-'Araqūsī (Beirut: Mu'assasat al-Risāla, 1996), vol. 4, 545.

⁴³ Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān*, vol. 5, 447-453.

⁴⁴ Al-Rāzī, *Al-Tafsīr al-kabīr*, vol. 8, 74-75.

⁴⁵ Abū al-Walīd Ibn Rushd, *Al-Bayān wa al-taḥṣīl* [The Clarification and Explication] (Beirut: Dār al-Gharb Al-Islāmī, 1988), vol. 18, 448-449.

⁴⁶ For example, Ibn 'Āshūr, *Al-Tahrīr wal-tanwīr*, vol. 3, 258.

⁴⁷ Parrinder, *Jesus in the Qur'an*, 106; Mark Robert Anderson, *The Qur'an in Context: A Christian Exploration* (Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2016), 247.

Muslim belief that God could not have let Jesus be killed by his enemies.⁴⁸ This claim is groundless because the Qur'ān states the Jews previously killed prophets (2:61, 2:87, 2:91, 3:21, 3:112, 3:181, 3:183 and 5:70), so the killing of Jesus would not have represented a theological problem. Being faithful to *aḥadīth* about Jesus' return to earth is also given as a reason for the Muslim misunderstanding of *wfy* contrary to its more frequently used meaning.⁴⁹ This is Ibn 'Āshūr's view as well, who states that Muslim scholars chose to apply *ta'wīl* to the Qur'ānic verb rather than to the meaning of Jesus' life and descent in *aḥadīth*.⁵⁰

The fact that most appearances of *wfy* are in connection with death or separation of the soul from the body is usually used to conclude there is no justification for claiming the two instances of this verb in Jesus' story have a different meaning.⁵¹ This claim ignores the fact that *wfy* is also used to mean something other than death. This term, therefore, must have a *broader* meaning in the Qur'ān that includes the *specific* meaning of death, which is conceded even by those who argue that Jesus died on the cross.⁵² As noted by one scholar, "the fifth form passive of *wfy* only comes to mean 'die' by extension. The original sense seems to be 'take' or 'seize', which is then broadened to cover the idea of God's taking the soul unto Himself."⁵³ One study that fails to note the broader meaning of *wfy* in the Qur'ān inaccurately concludes it is used "in situations where the focus is upon premature death with a progression in the direction of connoting the providential dimension of the end of a person's life."⁵⁴

THE TERM *WFY* IN THE QUR'ĀN

The trilateral verb *wfy* appears in eight forms as many as 66 times in the Qur'ān, as shown in Table 1. It conveys the general meaning of "claim in full," "pay in full" and "fulfil." Almost two-thirds of its appearances in the Qur'ān are not related to death. The only form that is connected with death is form V of the verb, which appears 24 times as *tawaffā*, including once with reference to Jesus, and once as *mutawaffī*, which is the second time it is used in relation to him. Those 23 occurrences of *wfy*, in as many verses, should allow us to understand the likely meaning of this verb in the other two instances of its use for Jesus.

⁴⁸ Mourad, "Does the Qur'an," 350-351; Suleiman A. Mourad "The Death of Jesus in Islam: Reality, Assumptions, and Implications," in *Engaging the Passion: Perspectives on the Death of Jesus*, ed. Oliver Larry Yarbrough (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), 366.

⁴⁹ Oddbjørn Leirvik, *Images of Jesus Christ in Islam* (London: Continuum, 2010), 68.

⁵⁰ Ibn 'Āshūr, *Al-Tahrīr wal-tanwīr*, vol. 3, 258-259.

⁵¹ Gabriel Said Reynolds, "The Muslim Jesus: Dead or Alive?" *Bulletin of SOAS* 72, no. 2 (2009): 239-240.

⁵² Ayoub, *A Muslim View of Christianity*, 169; Todd Lawson, *The Crucifixion and the Qur'an: A Study in the History of Muslim Thought* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2009), 30.

⁵³ Jane Dammen McAuliffe, *Qur'anic Christians: An Analysis of Classical and Modern Exegesis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 133.

⁵⁴ Mathias Zahniser, "The Forms of Tawaffā in the Qur'an: A Contribution to Christian-Muslim Dialogue," *The Muslim World* 79, no. 1 (1989): 14.

Table 1: The forms of the verbal root *wfy* in the Qur'ān

| Arabic | Form | Frequency | Meaning |
|------------------|---------------------------|-----------|---|
| <i>Tawaffā</i> | Form V verb | 24 | Take; take the soul; take consciousness |
| <i>Mutawaffī</i> | Form V active participle | 1 | Take |
| <i>Waffā</i> | Form II verb | 18 | Pay/give in full; fulfil |
| <i>Awfā</i> | Form IV verb | 18 | Fulfil; give in full |
| <i>Yastawfū</i> | Form X verb | 1 | Take in full |
| <i>Awfā</i> | Nominal | 2 | The fullest; more faithful |
| <i>Muwaffū</i> | Form II active participle | 1 | Paying in full |
| <i>Mūfūn</i> | Form IV active participle | 1 | Fulfilling |

Out of these 23 verses, 20 use the verb *wfy* in connection with *causing death*. The other three show it has a broader meaning, one specific case of which is causing death. The *first* of the three verses commands the believers to confine women who are found to have committed unlawful sexual acts to houses “until *mawt* (death) *yatawaffāhunna* (takes them) or Allah ordains for them another way” (4:15). As *mawt* is the subject of the verb *wfy* in *yatawaffāhunna*, it cannot mean “cause to die”; otherwise, the clause *yatawaffāhunna al-mawtu* would mean “death causes them to die,” which makes no sense. *Wafāt* here must be referring to something that, in this context, is caused by death. Accordingly, *yatawaffāhunna* may be translated as “takes them” or “seizes them,” which denotes the taking of the soul, when death is the context of the action. The target of the verb, therefore, is the “soul,” whose separation from the body defines death.

This conclusion, which is drawn by some scholars,⁵⁵ is confirmed in the *second* verse that uses the verb in its broad sense of “take.” This verse describes what happens to human beings during sleep:

Allah *yatawaffā* the *anfus* (souls) at the time of their *mawt* and those that do not die during their sleep. Then He keeps those for which He has decreed *mawt* and releases the others for a specified term. (39:42)

Unlike in death, where *wfy* donates the *permanent taking of the nafs (soul)*, in the case of sleep, it identifies the *temporary taking of the soul*. In death, the soul is taken for good, whereas in sleep, the soul is sent back, with *wfy* used in both cases. This is why Muslim exegetes have identified and distinguished between these two different types of *wafāt*, one of death and the other of sleep.

Of course, death and sleep are biologically completely different. Death denotes a permanent and total loss of consciousness and sensory and perceptual activity, whereas sleep is associated with a temporary reduction in these faculties. The Qur'ān considers death as the end of the

⁵⁵ Ayoub, *A Muslim View of Christianity*, 169; Lawson, *The Crucifixion and the Qur'an*, 30; McAuliffe, *Qur'anic Christians*, 133.

person's life *only in this world*.⁵⁶ In this sense, death is also a temporary state of unconsciousness because the person will be brought back to life on the Day of Resurrection.

That the *tawaffī* of a person does not necessarily mean causing their death because it could denote sleep – that is, a death-like state of unconsciousness – is confirmed again in the *third* verse that uses the verb in its broad meaning:

It is He who *yatawaffākum* by night and knows what you have committed by day. Then He revives you so that a specified term may be fulfilled. Then to Him will be your return; then He will inform you about what you used to do. He is the subjugator over His servants. He sends over you guardians until when *mawt* comes to one of you, Our messengers *tawaffathu*, and they do not fail [in their duties] (6:60-61).

Here, again, the Qur'ān unambiguously identifies two types of *wafāt*. Verse 6:60 uses *wfy* in the sense of the *temporary* taking of the soul in sleep, whereas 6:61 uses it for the *permanent* seizing of the soul in death.

Verse 6:61 also contains a term that further confirms this understanding of *tawaffī/wafāt*, which is *mawt*. Forms of this word occur in the Qur'ān 165 times – two and a half as many times as the derivatives of *wfy*. *Mawt* refers to death in the strict sense of ceasing to be alive. Its meaning is simple and has no nuances. Verse 6:61 makes a clear distinction between *mawt* as the *state of lifelessness* and *tawaffī* as the *process of causing death*. One significant difference between the two is that the focus of *mawt* is the *termination of the physical body*, whereas the focal point of *tawaffī* is the *preservation of the soul*.

This contrast in the level of sophistication in meaning is clear in the use of the two words. *Mawt* is used for all forms of living creatures, i.e. including those that may not have souls, whereas *tawaffī* is restricted to human beings. Also, *mawt* is used either with God as the agent causing the death or, significantly, without an agent. In this case, the person acts as the subject because the focus of the verb is only the change from the state of being alive to the state of being dead. This use shows the emphasis of the meaning is on the outcome, not the process that leads to it. The verb *wfy*, on the other hand, is mostly used with a subject as the agent that affects the process of death, i.e. performs the taking of the soul. In the remaining small number of verses in which there is no subject, *wfy* appears in the passive voice, so an agent is implied.⁵⁷

At this point of my analysis, all that can be said about *tawaffī* in the case of Jesus is that it could mean he was made to die or he was put in a state of sleep or something similar. Focusing exclusively on this term does not justify reaching a definite conclusion about its meaning in the case of Jesus – a mistake some have made.⁵⁸ If there were no other verses to shed more light on this subject, the conclusion would have to be that the Qur'ān is inconclusive on this matter. Yet such verses – including those that use the term *rafʿ*, which I will consider later –

⁵⁶ Oliver Leaman, "Death," in *The Qur'an: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Oliver Leaman (Oxon: Routledge, 2006).

⁵⁷ The subject of this transitive verb is God in eight verses (3:193, 7:126, 10:46, 10:104, 12:101, 13:40, 16:70 and 40:77), the angels in seven (4:97, 6:61, 7:37, 8:50, 16:28, 16:32 and 47:27) and the Angel of Death in one (32:11). The angels are agents of God, so He is ultimately the actor. In another four verses (2:234, 2:240, 22:5 and 40:67), the verb occurs in the passive voice, so the subject is implied.

⁵⁸ For example, Zahniser, "The Forms of Tawaffā in the Qur'an."

exist. They show the Qur'ān is unambiguous in indicating the *tawaffī* of Jesus could not denote his death. To assert “it is quite permissible to understand these two verses (3:55 and 5:117) as indicating the death of Jesus”⁵⁹ is to ignore those other verses.

DISTINGUISHING BETWEEN JESUS' *WAFĀT* AND *MAWT*

One verse that clarifies what the Qur'ān means when it applies *tawaffī* to Jesus has him use *mawt* when referring to his death, “the day I *amūtu*” (19:33). Yet when God (3:55) and Jesus (5:117) refer to the action that ended Jesus' contact with the Jews, both verses use *wfy*, whose focus is the taking of the soul, not the ending of life. Interestingly, *mawt* can be used with an agent, not just without it, yet both verses use *tawaffī* instead of *mawt*. This contrast with 19:33, which uses *mawt*, is significant. Some scholars have ignored the distinction between the two terms in the Qur'ān to rush into concluding that the *tawaffī* of Jesus means his death.⁶⁰

There are 21 verses in which *mawt* appears in verbal form IV. This verb would have been used if Jesus' death was the focus of 3:55 and 5:117. What is being highlighted, rather, is a temporary death-like state. As I shall argue later, this action of *tawaffī* is inseparably connected to the action of “raising” Jesus.

In 26:81, Prophet Abraham describes God as the ultimate cause of whatever happens to him, including death. As expected, and as Jesus does in verse 19:33, he uses *yumītunī*, rather than *yatawaffānī*. In his commentary on 3:55, the 20th-century exegete al-Ṭabātabā'ī quotes 32:11 and 39:42 before going on to note that “*tawaffī* is not used in the Qur'ān to mean *mawt* but to denote the care of taking and preserving... He (exalted is He) uses the term *mawt*, rather than *tawaffī*, in places where this care (of taking and preserving) is not the referent.”⁶¹ He then gives a few examples of the many such verses, including 19:33 on Jesus and 3:144 that mentions the two possibilities that Muḥammad “*māta* or is killed.”

In summary, *tawaffī* appears in the Qur'ān in the sense of claiming the soul permanently, which denotes death, or claiming it temporarily, which refers to sleep. The fine distinction between this term and *mawt* makes it highly unlikely that *tawaffī* refers to Jesus' death in verses 3:55 and 5:117. This conclusion will be further confirmed when we examine God's raising of Jesus. These multiple Qur'ānic assertions are mainly behind the view of most Muslim scholars that *wfy* does not mean “cause to die” in the case of Jesus, although *aḥādīth* about his return are also cited.

⁵⁹ Lawson, *The Crucifixion and the Qur'an*, 30.

⁶⁰ For example, Leirvik, *Images of Jesus Christ in Islam*, 68.

⁶¹ Muḥammad Al-Ṭabātabā'ī, *Al-Mīzān fī tafsīr al-Qur'ān* [The Balance in Interpreting the Qur'ān] (Beirut: Mu'assasat al-A'lamī lil-Maṭbū'āt, 1997), vol. 3, 239.

A PHYSICAL *RAF'* (RAISING) OF JESUS

God's raising of Jesus is mentioned in 3:55 (*rāfi' uka*) and 4:158 (*rafa' ahu*). The trilateral root *raf'* occurs 29 times in the Qur'ān, including 22 times in verbal forms. It has two different meanings:

- The spatial raising of something or someone, such as erecting places of worship (24:36)
- The raising of the standing or status of something or someone, such as the spiritual promotion of individuals (e.g. 12:76)

Similar to their consensus that Jesus was not crucified, Muslim scholars have traditionally agreed that God's raising of Jesus was to heaven, so it was a physical raising, and he was raised alive.⁶² In the last century or so, a few scholars have taken the agnostic position that the text is ambiguous about what exactly happened to Jesus.⁶³ This caution reflects uncertainty not only about the meaning of the divine action of raising Jesus but also about what happened to him after the crucifixion.

On the other hand, Muslim and non-Muslim scholars who do not accept that Jesus was physically raised from earth to heaven argue that his elevation in the Qur'ān was allegorical. They claim God raised Jesus in status, not physically.⁶⁴ However, there are several flaws with this view.

First, all seven verses that use *raf'* in the sense of raising a person in status, not spatially, include a word that makes this meaning abundantly clear. Six (2:253, 6:83, 6:165, 12:76, 43:32 and 58:11) of these verses use the plural word *darajāt* (ranks). The other verse (7:176) uses *āyāt* (signs) as the way God would have raised someone in status. Both verses on Jesus' raising do not include such a word. This qualifier would have been necessary had the raising been in status, not physical.

Second, given that other prophets had been rescued by God or killed by their enemies, this view fails to explain why Jesus is uniquely described as having been raised to God. The Qur'ān describes how God saved Noah, Abraham, Moses and other prophets from their respective peoples when they tried to kill them. It also mentions the killing of unnamed prophets. None of these saved or martyred, named or unnamed prophets are said to have been "raised."

⁶² Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān*, vol. 5, 447-453, vol. 7, 662-663; Al-Rāzī, *Al-Tafsīr al-kabīr*, vol. 8, 74-75, vol. 11, 104-105.

⁶³ In his commentary on 4:157, Sayyid Quṭb says, "The Qur'an does not give details about this raising. Was it in both the body and the soul while alive? Or was it in the soul only after death? When was this taking/death? Where?" Sayyid Quṭb, *Fī dīlāl al-Qur'ān* [In the Shade of the Qur'an] (Cairo: Dār al-Shurūq, 2003), vol. 6, 802. In his popular book on the stories of prophets, 'Abd al-Wahhāb al-Najjār says that God may have caused Jesus to die on earth, put him to sleep as He did to the sleepers of the cave (18:9-26) or raised him to heaven. 'Abd al-Wahhāb Al-Najjār, *Qīṣaṣ al-anbiyā'* [The Stories of Prophets] (Cairo: Maṭba'at Naṣr, 1936), 512. See also Muḥammad Abū Zahra, *Muḥāzarāt fīl-naṣrāniyya* [Lectures on Christianity] (Riyadh: Al-Ri'āsa al-'Āmma li-'Idārāt al-Buḥūth al-'Ilmiyya, 1983), 30-31.

⁶⁴ Riḍā, *Tafsīr al-manār*, vol. 3, 316; Shaltūt, *Al-Fatāwā*, 54-55; Ibn 'Āshūr, *Al-Tahrīr wal-tanwīr*, vol. 6, 23; Laffoon, "Polyphony and Symphony," 164.

Others liken Jesus' raising to the case of martyrs who are described as "alive with their Lord" (3:169), i.e. they died on earth but are spiritually alive in heaven.⁶⁵ This semblance is illogical because those scholars still accept that Jesus was not killed to start with. Also, this argument is invalid because it invokes a *general* statement to explain Jesus' *unique* treatment in the Qur'ān.

Third, raising Jesus is presented in 4:158 as God's reply to the attempt to *crucify and kill* him, not merely *humiliate* him. Raising Jesus in stature in the sight of God would not have meant foiling the attempt on his life. Jesus' enemies would have sought him again as soon as they realised he had evaded the crucifixion and was still about, so the goal of the divine rescue was to physically raise him to heaven out of their reach.

Fourth, in addition to the two verses about Jesus, there is one other instance in which the Qur'ān uses the verb *raf'* in the sense of *raising a person to a physical place*, which concerns Prophet Idrīs (19:57).⁶⁶ The Qur'ān does not state or imply that Idrīs died before he was raised by God. Arguably, as in the case of Jesus, it would make little sense for the Qur'ān to present raising a dead body as a favour reflecting someone's elevated status with God nor is there anything to indicate any dissimilarity between the raising by God of Jesus and Idrīs. Al-Ṭabarī reports that Mujāhid said "Idrīs was raised, so he did not die, as Jesus was raised" and he ascribes to others the view that Idrīs was raised to one of the heavens.⁶⁷

Also, the *makān* (place) to which Idrīs was taken is described as *'aliyyā* (high). Each of the three other occurrences of the word *makān* in the same Qur'ānic chapter of the Idrīs verse also denotes a physical location.⁶⁸

One of Muḥammad 'Abduh's prominent students, Maḥmūd Shaltūt, who became the Grand Imam of al-Azhar from 1958 until he died in 1963, rightly argues that the verb *wfy* in the Qur'ān is mainly used for death. When this is not the case, he also correctly notes, the verb is associated with something that moves it away from this meaning.⁶⁹ For instance, in a statement such as "it is He who *yatawaffākum* by night," the phrase "by night" provides a context to clarify that *wfy* does not refer to its more frequent use in the sense of death. Shaltūt went on to, this time incorrectly, claim that no such contextualisation is provided in the two instances in which *wfy* is applied to Jesus, concluding the term must refer to death. The raising of Jesus by God is a major context for *tawaffī* in this specific case. Because the *tawaffī* of Jesus is followed by

⁶⁵ Shalabī, *Al-Masīḥīyyah*, 58-59.

⁶⁶ Idrīs is identified in Muslim tradition with the Biblical figure of Enoch, who was also taken by God (Gen. 5:24). John C. Reeves, "Some Explorations of the Intertwining of Bible and Qur'an," in *Bible and the Qur'an: Essays in Scriptural Intertextuality*, ed. John C. Reeves (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003), 44-52; Yoram Erder, "Idrīs," in *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'an*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 484.

⁶⁷ Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān*, vol. 15, 563-565.

⁶⁸ The place where Mary lived to dedicate herself to worshipping God is called *sharqiyyā* (eastern) (19:16), where she went after becoming pregnant is described as *qaṣīyyā* (remote) (19:22) and the abode of the disbelievers on the Day of Resurrection is said to be *sharrun* (a worse) place (19:75).

⁶⁹ Shaltūt, *Al-Fatāwā*, 52.

raising him, it cannot mean death in this instance. Shaltūt's conclusion also ignores the clear distinction in the Qur'ān between *wafāt* and *mawt*.

It looks reasonable to conclude the Qur'ān unambiguously shows the raising of Jesus was physical, not metaphorical. Expectedly, no attempt has been made by proponents of the metaphorical interpretation to explain what that supposed exaltation of Jesus by God means, as there is no mention of it in the Qur'ān.

A RAISING TO HEAVEN

My above conclusion is further confirmed by the fact the Qur'ān has clear indications that the relocation of Jesus was to somewhere in heaven, rather than another place on earth.

First, the Jesus verses use “raise” rather than “move,” “migrate” or any other verb that describes the common practice of moving from one place to another on earth. The verb *rafʿ* means to “raise” or “lift” to a higher place. Unlike other verbs, it emphasises the *upward* nature of the move.

Second, unlike the other relocations mentioned in the Qur'ān, Jesus' relocation is attributed to God. This implies it is an action that could not have been done by Jesus but required divine intervention. This is in line with the view that this was a supernatural transfer from earth to heaven.

Third, the description of raising Jesus as being “to Me” and “to Himself” is strong evidence that God elevated him to heaven. Of the 22 occurrences of the verbal form of *rafʿ* in the Qur'ān, it is followed by the preposition *ilā* (to) only in the case of Jesus and it is used in both Jesus verses. This preposition requires identifying a destination, hence “Me” and “Himself.” The expressions “to Me” and “to Himself” are not used anywhere else with the verb *rafʿ*, yet one of them is found in each of the two verses about Jesus.

Thus, the Qur'ān contains several arguments that Jesus' raising was physical and further confirmatory arguments indicating it was to heaven.

Al-Rāzī states the raising of Jesus to God was “in rank and virtues, not in place and direction.” He makes this statement in the context of rejecting the claim of the advocates of anthropomorphism that God's raising of Jesus to Himself means He is located somewhere.⁷⁰ Ignoring its context, al-Rāzī's statement has been misrepresented as meaning that he favoured the view that Jesus was not physically raised but died on earth.⁷¹ Al-Rāzī's position is further clarified when, in another refutation of anthropomorphism, he states the raising was “to a place where only Allah's law prevails.” He then goes on to give as examples the migration of the early Muslims to Medina and Prophet Abraham away from his people, which are obviously spatial.⁷² He also cites the physical night journey of Prophet Muḥammad, which was followed

⁷⁰ Al-Rāzī, *Al-Tafsīr al-kabīr*. vol. 8, 76-77.

⁷¹ Riḍā, *Tafsīr al-manār*, vol. 6, 21; Shalabī, *Al-Masīḥīyyah*, 63-64; Laffoon, “Polyphony and Symphony,” 164.

⁷² Al-Rāzī, *Al-Tafsīr al-kabīr*. vol. 11, 104.

by the ascension to heaven, in support of the view that God raised Jesus to heaven.⁷³ This similarity has been noted by others.⁷⁴ Al-Zamakhsharī⁷⁵ gives the simple and uncontroversial interpretation of “to Me” in “raising you to Me” as meaning “to My heaven and the abode of My angels.”

The Qur’ān has another potentially relevant story of God sending three messengers to a certain people. Only one man believed in God’s call and unsuccessfully pleaded with his people to follow suit. He was saved before his people were destroyed (36:25-30). Describing the messengers as being “from heaven” and naming the place to which the man was taken as “paradise” suggest he was transferred to somewhere in heaven. Exegetes often claim this man was killed by his people, so his reported speech was made in the place where martyrs live (2:154 and 3:169). But others, such as al-Rāzī,⁷⁶ have pointed out the possibility that he was taken to heaven alive. Nothing in the verse suggests he was murdered. If anything, the context indicates the all-powerful heavenly soldiers who destroyed his people would have protected him before transporting him to heaven. Interestingly, al-Ṭabātabā’ī⁷⁷ mentions unnamed scholars who have gone as far as suggesting that “Allah raised him to heaven, where he was told ‘Enter paradise’. He continues to live there until the Hour.” He rejects this interpretation as being unsupported by the Qur’ān, but it indicates the realisation of some scholars of the similarities between the raising of this man and that of Jesus.

This and the previous section have argued that the Qur’ān indicates that God’s raising of Jesus was to a physical location in heaven, rather than in status. This, in turn, is another confirmation that the *tawaffī* of Jesus did not mean his death but its second sense, which denotes some sleep-like state. As noted by one scholar, to suggest that the *tawaffī* of Jesus meant death “would be to ignore the fact that 3:55 contains an additional statement in which God speaks of raising him or causing him to ascend into His presence.”⁷⁸

JESUS’ FATE FROM DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES

The end of Jesus’ life on earth is described in verse 3:55 as *taking and raising*, in 5:117 as *taking*, and in 4:158 as *raising*. This intriguing observation reflects the fact the three verses describe Jesus’ fate from three different perspectives. This becomes clear when studying each verse in its context, which will further confirm our conclusions about the meanings of *tawaffī* and *raf‘* and what exactly happened to Jesus.

I will start with 3:55, whose context is chronologically the earliest of the three verses. It is immediately preceded by a verse that confirms that Jesus’ enemies had a plan against him but

⁷³ Ibid., vol. 11, 105.

⁷⁴ Muḥammad Mitwallī Al-Sha‘rāwī, *Khawāṭirī ḥawla al-qur’ān al-karīm* [Reflections on the Noble Qur’ān] (Cairo: Akhbār al-Yawm, 1991), vol. 5, 2796.

⁷⁵ Al-Zamakhsharī, *Al-Kashshāf*, vol. 1, 562.

⁷⁶ Al-Rāzī, *Al-Tafsīr al-kabīr*, vol. 26, 60.

⁷⁷ Al-Ṭabātabā’ī, *Al-Mīzān*, vol. 17, 79.

⁷⁸ Neal Robinson, *Christ in Islam and Christianity* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1991), 114.

God's counterplan would foil it. Verse 3:55 then describes how God informed Jesus about how He was going to help him. God had to tell him *in detail* how He was going to do to rescue him, which involved *taking* and *raising* Jesus.⁷⁹

But when at a later time God questioned Jesus about why people took him and his mother for a god, Jesus replied by mentioning God's taking, but not raising, of him, "I was a witness over them as long as I was *fihim*; but when *tawaffaytanī*, You were the observer over them" (5:117). Unlike the context of 3:55, which was God informing Jesus of what was going to happen to him, the context of Jesus' reply in 5:117 was to highlight the fact he could not influence what people did after he was taken away from them. Significantly, Jesus contrasted his *tawaffī* with being *fihim*. Put differently, Jesus used God's taking of him, *tawaffī*, to refer to His raising him, *raf*^ʿ. This is understandable phenomenologically. From Jesus' perspective, his loss of awareness of and influence over the reported people ended as soon as he experienced *wafāt*. The raising was not something he felt, as it happened while he was not wakeful. Having been already told that God would take and raise him, he realised what had taken place when he woke up in his new abode in heaven. This phenomenological perspective seems to lend support to the minority view of al-Suddī (d. 127), which is favoured by al-Ṭabarī,⁸⁰ that the dialogue in 5:117 between God and Jesus happened after he was raised to heaven, rather than it will happen on the Day of Judgement.

Yet unlike in 3:55 and 5:117, when the Qur'ān makes a general statement to its audience about Jesus' fate, it describes it as Jesus having been raised by God. After denying the Jews' claim that they killed Jesus in 4:157, verse 4:158 explains what truly happened, "Rather, Allah *rafa* *'ahu* to Himself." Here, the *raf*^ʿ of Jesus is contrasted with killing him. This is natural, as it would have been raising him, not putting him into a sleep-like state, which ultimately saved him from his enemies.

We now have the complete Qur'ānic picture of what happened to Jesus. God put him in a sleep-like state, which was a necessary intermediary action to raise him. In other words, these two actions are inseparable, forming the two integral parts of one divine intervention, which is why it is described as *taking and raising* in 3:55, *taking* in 5:117, and *raising* in 4:158. This further confirms our conclusion earlier that the *tawaffī* and *raf*^ʿ of Jesus cannot be understood in isolation from each other. Each can be properly understood only in the context of its complementary nature to the other. Put differently, Jesus would not have experienced a *wafāt* were he not going to experience a *raf*^ʿ, and he would not have been raised before being put in a sleep-like state.

This supernatural understanding of Jesus' rescue is in line with other verses that suggest he was miraculously saved from the attempt to crucify him. For instance, 5:110 reminds Jesus of the miracles that God granted him before going on to mention how God "restrained the Children of Israel" from him. The context strongly suggests the rescue was supernatural.

⁷⁹ *Cleansing* Jesus of the disbelievers was only a consequence of *taking and raising* him, as it meant keeping him away from his enemies and their harm.

⁸⁰ Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān*, vol. 9, 135.

Without divine intervention of the type that made Jesus' miracles possible, he could not have escaped the persistent hostility of his enemies. As has been noted, Jesus came into life via the miracle of the virginal conception, so it is not surprising that he should also depart life by a miracle.⁸¹ The *tawaffi* and *raf'* of Jesus were miraculous, but so were many episodes of his life, according to the Qur'ān.

CONCLUSION

The traditional, majority view is that Jesus was raised to heaven alive, continues to live there and will descend to earth close to the end-time. A minority view that developed in the last one and a half centuries argues that Jesus died naturally on earth, so he was not raised alive to heaven and will not come back. In this paper, I have argued in favour of a combination of the majority opinion that Jesus was raised alive to heaven and the minority view that he died naturally. That Jesus died after, not before, he was raised means he died in the abode in heaven to which he was taken. With this partial agreement and disagreement with the majority and minority views on the concepts of *tawaffi* and *raf'*, this article proposed a relatively new understanding of the Qur'ānic portrayal of the end of Jesus' life.

The support for the traditional view comes mainly from *aḥadīth*. Such narratives are found in all major ḥadīth sources, including al-Bukhārī and Muslim. This has led to the treatment of Jesus' return as a fundamental Muslim belief and even conflating it with Islam's articles of faith,⁸² accusing those who deny it of *kufir*.⁸³ The conclusion of this article implies that those *aḥadīth* are inauthentic. Indeed, scholars who argue that Jesus died naturally on earth claim the *aḥadīth* on Jesus' return are *aḥād*, rather than *mutawātir*, so their credal status is at best doubtful.⁸⁴ Consequently, Jesus' return is not a tenet of Islam. Books of creeds also distinguish it and other beliefs from the six articles of faith.⁸⁵

Furthermore, the return of Jesus is, by its very definition, something that would be experienced only by one generation. It is practically irrelevant and inconsequential for all earlier generations. To posit such a future event as a basic belief for every Muslim does not sound logical. Any belief that is required of all Muslims is relevant to every Muslim, such as the belief in the Day of Judgement. This is not the case with Jesus' presumed return.

⁸¹ Al-Sha'rawī, *Khawāṭir*, vol. 5, 2794.

⁸² According to the Qur'ān (4:136 and 65:3), the six articles of faith are to believe in Allah, the angels, the revealed Books, the Messengers, the Day of Resurrection and predestination. They are also mentioned in *aḥadīth* as well. Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, vol. 1, no. 1, 37.

⁸³ Al-Ghamārī, *Iqāmat al-burhān*, 108; Muḥammad Al-Albānī, *Qiṣṣat al-masīḥ al-dajjāl wa nuzūl 'Īsā 'alayhi al-ṣalāt wal-salām wa qatlihi iyyāhu* [The Story of the Antichrist, Descent of Jesus (Prayer and Peace be upon him) and Killing him] (Amman: Al-Maktaba al-Islāmiyya, 2000), 22-23, 37.

⁸⁴ Shaltūt, *Al-Fatāwā*, 66.

⁸⁵ For instance, al-Ṭaḥāwī's list of the beliefs of the creed of the *Ahl al-Sunna wal-Jamā'a* separates the articles of faith in Islam (p. 27) from other beliefs, including the descent of Jesus (p. 30). Aḥmad Ibn Muḥammad Al-Ṭaḥāwī, *Sharḥ al-'adīda al-ṭaḥāwīyya* [An Interpretation of Al-Ṭaḥāwī's Creed], ed. Ṣāliḥ Āl al-Shaykh (Al-Manṣūra: Dār al-Mawadda, 2011).

Finally, the traditional Muslim view, the minority position and the view proposed in this article each agrees with some aspects of the respective Gospel narratives and disagrees with others. However, all of them share the same fundamental rejection of Jesus' crucifixion, the redemptive function of his death and his divinity. These Christian beliefs are incompatible with Muslim theology.

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