

Did Jesus Die on the Cross?
The History of Reflection on the End of His Earthly Life
in Sunnī Tafsīr Literature

Joseph L. Cumming
Yale University
May 2001

joseph.cumming@yale.edu

Did Jesus die on the cross and then rise from the dead? This question has remarkable power to generate vigorous discussion between Muslims and Christians. As one contemporary writer has pointed out, “*Hādhā al-mawḍū’ yuthīru jadaliyyat al-Islām ka-mā lam yuthirhā ayyu mawḍū’ ākhar.*”¹ Indeed, whenever Muslims and Christians discuss religious matters together, the topic of conversation almost always seems to turn sooner or later to this question. Perhaps this is not surprising in light of a history in which the Crusades’ exploitation of the cross as religious symbol transformed it from a sign which calls Christians to lay down their lives for others out of love² into a sign of Christians’ readiness to kill others for their own selfish ends.

Discussion of the crucifixion of Jesus generally leads to one of two conclusions: 1) an effort by each side to persuade the other that “we are right and you are wrong,” or 2) a polite decision to “agree to disagree.” In either case this assumes that there is no common ground to be found on this question. It is the intent of this present paper to call that assumption into question. Specifically this paper will attempt a sympathetic examination of the Islamic tradition to see what answers to this question have been historically possible within the Muslim community. We will do this by examining the qur’ānic verses which underlie the discussion, and the history of mainstream Sunnī interpretation of these verses. A separate project (perhaps to be undertaken by a Muslim scholar?) would be to examine the Christian tradition in a similarly sympathetic way and then to consider what common ground may result from the two studies.

¹ Iskandar Jadīd, *Al-Ṣalīb fī al-Injīl wa-l-Qur’ān* (Beirut: Markaz al-Shabība, n.d.), p. 5.

² Cf. 1 John 3:16 or Philippians 2:4-8, for example.

In the Muslim world today probably the most widely-known view on this question is that God caused someone else (a substitute) to appear to be Jesus, and that that substitute was crucified in Jesus' stead, while God took Jesus directly to heaven alive. Less well-known, but nonetheless widely held, is the view that Jesus himself was indeed nailed to the cross, but that he only lost consciousness on the cross and subsequently revived in the tomb. This view, which has been popularized by the polemical writings of Ahmed Deedat, is most commonly found in South Asia today. Kenneth Cragg notes:

The Ahmadiyyah and the Qadiānī movement in South Asia hold the following view: "Jesus was [nailed to the cross] and later taken down, still living, and laid in the cold tomb. Thus they did not succeed in killing him by crucifixion. He revived in the tomb, escaped, and later journeyed east, to die at a great age in Kashmir, where, near Srinagar, his tomb may still be seen."³

Both of these views (substitution and loss of consciousness) have historical support in the Islamic exegetical tradition, as do a number of other views as well. Islamic reflection on this question has historically centered on the exegesis of certain verses in the Qur'ān. Though occasional remarks on the subject can be found in other genres, such as the *Rasā'il* of the *Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'*,⁴ the most influential Islamic discussion of the question is to be found in the tafsīr literature. It would be beyond the scope of this paper

³ Kenneth Cragg, *The Call of the Minaret*, second edition, revised and enlarged (Ibadan: Daystar Press, 1985), p. 224.

⁴ Neal Robinson, *Christ in Islam and Christianity* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), pp. 56-57 summarizes the view of the *Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'* thus: "Jesus' humanity (*nāsūt*) was crucified, and his hands were nailed to the cross. He was left there all day, given vinegar to drink, and pierced with a lance. He was taken down from the cross, wrapped in a shroud and laid in the tomb. Three days later he appeared to the disciples and was recognised by them. When the news spread that he had not been killed, the Jews opened up the tomb but did not find his mortal remains (*nāsūt*). Although the Brethren of Purity rejected Christian claims concerning Christ's divinity, they appear to have been reconciled to belief in the reality of the crucifixion."

to attempt an encyclopedic analysis of all Islamic commentaries on this subject. In what follows we will focus on the most influential, mainstream commentaries of the Sunnī tradition. Specifically we will examine the commentaries of al-Ṭabari, Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, al-Qurṭubī, al-Bayḍāwī, and Sayyid Quṭb.

These commentaries address the question of the death of Jesus in the context of exegeting four specific qur’ānic verses. I list these verses here in translation with a caveat: “As any translation necessarily prejudices the results of [the exegetical process], those recorded herein should be read as tentative and subject to emendation in light of the full commentary tradition.”⁵

Āl ‘Imrān (3):55: [God said]: “O Jesus, I am causing you to ‘die’ [*mutawaffika*] and raising you to myself, and cleansing you of those who do not believe, and causing those who follow you to be above those who do not believe until the Day of Resurrection.

Al-Nisā’(4):157: [The Jews’] saying: “We killed Christ Jesus the son of Mary, the messenger of God.” And they did not kill him, and they did not crucify him, but it was made to appear so to them [*shubbiha lahum*]. And those who have differed about it are in doubt about it: they do not have knowledge about it, but only the following of supposition. They did not kill him for certain.

Al-Mā’ida (5):117: [Jesus said to God]: “I was a witness over them as long as I was among them, and when you caused me to ‘die’ [*tawaffaytanī*], you were their Overseer, and you are Witness over everything.”

Maryam (19):33: [Jesus said]: “Peace be upon me, the day I was born, the day I die [*amūtu*], and the day I am raised [*ub’athu*] alive.”

⁵ Jane Dammen McAuliffe, *Qur’ānic Christians: An Analysis of Classical and Modern Exegesis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 6.

Much of the exegetical discussion focuses on the correct translation of the verb *tawaffā*, which I have translated according to its most common sense⁶ (“die”) while placing that translation in quotation marks to indicate that the word can be understood in other ways. For *tawaffā* Rudi Paret makes the interesting suggestion of “abberufen”,⁷ which unfortunately is also difficult to translate naturally into English, though it has the ambiguous connotation of “call away.”

In reference to tradition of commentary on these verses Roger Arnaldez expresses the following opinion:

On voit que les commentaires sont loin de concorder. En particulier, la question se pose de savoir quand il faut situer la mort de Jésus. S’agit-il d’une mort au terme d’une vie humaine normale, ou d’une mort qui n’aura lieu que vers la fin des temps, quand viendra l’Heure dernière? Est-ce une mort véritable, ou une sorte de dormition? Et si c’est une mort véritable, coïncide-t-elle avec l’élévation au ciel, ou y a-t-il un intervalle entre les deux? Tous ces points ont été soutenus.⁸

In what follows we will see whether the commentary tradition is indeed as diverse as Arnaldez suggests. If so, then I would argue that such broad diversity of interpretation should be seen not as a sign not of a lack of concord, but rather of a rich exegetical heritage.

Al-Tabarī

⁶ Robinson, op. cit., p. 118.

⁷ Rudi Paret, *Der Koran: Übersetzung* (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer Verlag, 1979 : 7. Auflage – 1996), p. 47.

⁸ Arnaldez, Roger, *Jésus: Fils de Marie, prophète de l’Islam* (Paris : Desclée, 1980), p. 190-191.

The first commentary which we will consider is that of Abū Ja'far Muḥammad ibn Jarīr Al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923). This is far from being the earliest commentary on the Qur'ān, but it is the earliest of the commentaries which still have profound and far-reaching influence on Muslims today. It is widely considered to be “*afḍal al-tafsīr al-ma'thūra al-jāmi'a li-aqwāl al-salaf fī al-tafsīr*”⁹ – the highest example of a commentary which gathers the traditions and ḥadīths related to each verse, thus providing a window into how the Prophet and Companions and Followers may have interpreted the text. Though many of the isnāds are imperfect or incomplete (and al-Ṭabarī was aware of this), the traditions al-Ṭabarī reports provide at the very least an indication of the rich breadth and diversity of respectable Islamic exegesis in the third century A.H.

Though the gathering of early exegetical traditions forms the heart of al-Ṭabarī's work, scholars who have studied his commentary hasten to add that one should not stereotype him as *only* collecting the words reported from the early Muslim community and nothing more. A recent editor of his commentary writes:

⁹ Ṣalāḥ 'Abd al-Fattāḥ al-Khālīdī, Introduction to Abū Ja'far Muḥammad ibn Jarīr Al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī: Jāmi' al-Bayān 'an Ta'wīl Āy al-Qur'ān* (Damascus: Dār al-Qalam, 1997), vol. 1, p. 6.

Ḥalima ba'ḍuhum hādhā al-tafsīr kathīran 'indamā ja'alūhu tafsīran bi-l-ma'thūr faqaṭ wa-ṣannafūhu fī madrasat al-tafsīr al-atharī. Huwa tafsīr bi-l-ma'thūr wa-ziyāda wa-huwa yuṣannafū ḍimna madrasat al-tafsīr al-atharī al-naẓarī al-latī tajma'u bayna īrād al-aqwāl al-ma'thūra wa-bayna al-naẓarāt wa-l-ijtihādāt wa-l-istinbāṭāt, wa-l-latī abda'a al-Ṭabarī fihā ayyamā ibdā'.¹⁰

When dealing with verses which are open to multiple interpretations, al-Ṭabarī's frequent practice is to list, in order, each of the options which are represented in the traditions of which he is aware. Then, having listed all of these legitimate options, he frequently states which of them he considers to be “*rājiḥ*” – most likely, or having the greater weight of evidence in its favor.

In his discussion of the meaning of *mutawaffī* in Āl 'Imrān (3):55 we see an example of this kind of discussion. Al-Ṭabarī states:

Exegetes [*ahl al-ta'wīl*] have differed about the meaning of the “death” [*wafāt*] of Jesus here:

- 1) Some of them have said: “‘Death’ [*wafāt*] is with the meaning of sleep.” The meaning for them is “I am causing you to sleep and raising you to myself in your sleep.” [Al-Ṭabarī goes on to relate traditions which support this interpretation.]
- 2) Others have said, “‘Death’ [*wafāt*] here is with the meaning of seizing [*qabḍ*].” The meaning is: “I am seizing you from the earth and raising you to myself.” People commonly say: “I exacted [*tawaffaytu*] from so-and-so the money which he owed me.” That is, I received it in full [*istawfaytuhu*] and I seized it [*qabḍtuhu*]. So the meaning of His saying “I am causing you to ‘die’ and raising you to myself” is: I am seizing you from the earth alive to be close to me, and taking you to be with me without death, and raising you from among the unbelievers. Ibn Zayd said: “I am causing you to ‘die’” means “seizing you” when Jesus had not yet died, so that he might slay the *Dajjāl*, and then he will die. He read God's saying “He will speak to people in the

¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 10-11.

cradle and as a mature man [*kahlan*]” as meaning that God raised him before he could speak to people as a mature man, and he will return to earth as a mature man. [Al-Ṭabarī goes on to relate other traditions which support interpreting *wafāt* as meaning *qabd*.]

- 3) Others have said, “‘Death’ [*wafāt*] means the death of real, literal dying [*wafāt mawt ḥaqīqiyya*], that is, “I am causing you to die literally [*mumītuka*].” [Al-Ṭabarī goes on to relate traditions which support this interpretation.]
- 4) Others have said that this verse contains nonchronological arrangement [*taqdīm wa-ta’khīr*]. The implication is: I am raising you to myself and cleansing you of the unbelievers, and I will cause you to die after I send you back to earth at the end of time. [Al-Ṭabarī goes on to relate traditions which support this interpretation.]

And the best-supported [*rājih*] is the second statement: “I am seizing you [*qābiḍuka*] from the earth and causing you to ‘die’ [*mutawaffika*].” This is the best-supported [*rājih*] because of the continuous transmission [*tawātur*] of reports from the Messenger of God (may God bless him and save him) about the return to earth of Jesus (upon him peace) at the end of time.¹¹

Thus, al-Ṭabarī lists four theories of interpretation which he found in the traditions of Islamic exegesis before him: 1) sleep, 2) *wafāt* = *qabd*, 3) literal death, and 4) nonchronological arrangement. It is clear that he considers the second theory to have the best support in the traditions of which he is aware. But it is equally clear that he recognizes all four theories as having legitimate support in the traditions of Islamic exegesis of this text. The “sleep” theory may underlie the present-day view noted on p. 2 above according to which Jesus lost consciousness on the cross and revived in the tomb.

In his discussion of al-Nisā’ (4):157 al-Ṭabarī introduces the substitution theory (which we also noted on p. 2 above). In his brief discussion of Āl-‘Imrān (3):54, just

¹¹ Abū Ja’far Muḥammad ibn Jarīr Al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī: Jāmi’ al-Bayān ‘an Ta’wīl Āy al-Qur’ān*, Ṣalāḥ ‘Abd al-Fattāḥ al-Khālidi (ed.) (Damascus: Dār al-Qalam, 1997), loc. cit.

before the discussion on Āl-‘Imrān (3):55 quoted above, he makes very brief allusion to the substitution theory, but it is in reference to the words “*shubbiha lahum*” in al-Nisā’ (4):157 that he explains this theory in detail.

Again here he is aware of traditions supporting multiple theories for interpreting this verse. He writes:

How did God cause Jesus to appear to them? Exegetes have differed as to the manner of appearing which was caused to appear to the Jews in the matter of Jesus (upon him peace).¹²

Following the same system as before, al-Ṭabarī then lists multiple theories for how this “causing to appear” took place. He is aware of a tradition which holds that God caused the appearance of Jesus to fall upon all of his disciples [*hawāriyyūn*], so that the Jews were unable to tell which of them was Jesus. Al-Ṭabarī is also aware of a tradition which holds that Jesus asked his disciples for a single volunteer who would receive the appearance of Jesus and be crucified in his place.

As before, al-Ṭabarī next states which of these theories he considers most plausible [*rājiḥ*]. He prefers the theory that all of the disciples were made to resemble Jesus. His reason for this is that if only one disciple had been caused to resemble Jesus, then the Jews might have been confused, but the disciples themselves would not have been confused, and thus the Christians after them would not have been confused.

¹² Ibid., loc. cit.

In his discussion of al-Mā'ida (5):117 al-Ṭabarī reaffirms his view (stated above) that the most plausible interpretation of *tawaffā* is as meaning *qabaḍa*. He apparently views the substitution theory as coming under the rubric of the “*wafāt=qabḍ*” theory. In his very brief discussion of Maryam (19):33 he repeats the qur'ānic language about Jesus' dying and rising, but he does not address the question of whether this has implications for what happened on the cross.

Fakhr al-Dīn Al-Rāzī

If al-Ṭabarī is seen as the pinnacle of *tafsīr bi-l-ma'thūr*, the commentary of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1210)¹³ is widely seen as the pinnacle of *tafsīr bi-l-ra'y*. Al-Rāzī does review the various interpretations enunciated by his predecessors, and he does cite the traditions passed on from the Prophet and Companions and Followers. But unlike al-Ṭabarī he does not always consider it necessary to repeat the isnāds which support these traditions. And, once he has reviewed the available options, his “brilliant, analytical and questioning mind”¹⁴ goes on to evaluate their theological significance. In addition to his broad knowledge of the sciences of ḥadīth and tafsīr, al-Rāzī was a brilliant theologian

¹³ McAuliffe, p. 66n.151 insists that 1209 is incorrect.

¹⁴ Mahmoud Ayoub, “Towards an Islamic Christology, II: The Death of Jesus, Reality or Delusion (A Study of the Death of Jesus in Tafsīr Literature),” in *The Muslim World*, vol. LXX, No. 2 (Hartford: The Hartford Seminary Foundation, April, 1980), p. 92.

[*mutakallim*] with wide-ranging expertise in philosophy and a strong commitment to defending Ash'arite orthodoxy against Mu'tazilism and other sects.

Al-Rāzī brings all of this erudition to bear on his discussion of the death of Jesus. Jane Dammen McAuliffe says rightly about his analysis of the possible meanings of *mutawaffika* that “his performance is nothing short of an exegetical *tour de force*.”¹⁵

He begins by dividing the methods of exegeting the expression “I am causing you to ‘die’ [*mutawaffika*]” (Āl ‘Imrān (3): 55) into those which do *not* require chronological transposition [*taqdīm wa-ta’khīr*] of the “dying” and the “raising”, and those which *do*. It is clear that he prefers the former (which he calls the “outward, evident sense [*zāhir*]”), and he addresses this first. He lists eight different ways in which the expression can be understood, clearly implying that he considers all eight to be legitimate:

- 1) The meaning of his saying “I am causing you to ‘die’ [*mutawaffika*],” that is, bringing your lifespan to completion [*mutammim ‘umrika*] and thereupon I will cause you to ‘die’ [*atawaffāka*]. I will not let them get as far as killing you, but I will raise you to my heaven and bring you near to my angels, and I will preserve you from their being able to kill you. This is a good interpretation.
- 2) “I am causing you to ‘die’ [*mutawaffika*],” that is, causing your literal death [*mumītuka*]. And this is a tradition recounted on the authority of [*marwī ‘an*] Ibn ‘Abbās and Muḥammad ibn Ishāq. They said: the purpose was that his Jewish enemies should not be able to kill him, so then after that he honored him by raising him to heaven. Then, there are three different senses in which they understood this: First: Wahb said, “He died [*tuwuffiya*] for three hours, then was raised [*rufi ‘a*].” Second: Muḥammad ibn Ishāq said, “He died [*tuwuffiya*] for seven hours, then God restored him to life [*ahyāhu*] and raised

¹⁵ McAuliffe, p. 137.

him [*rafa'ahu*].” Third: al-Rabīʿ ibn Anas said, “He (exalted is he) caused him to die [*tawaffāhu*] at the moment when he raised him [*rafa'ahu*] to heaven.” God has said (exalted is he) [in al-Zumar (39):42], “God causes souls to die [*yatawaffā al-anfus*] at the time of their death [*mawt*], and in their sleep those who have not died [*lam tamut*].”

- 3) [The text has no #3 here, but rather skips directly from #2 to #4, so that the eight options are numbered 1-9.]
- 4) In the interpretation of this verse, the “and” in his statement “causing you to ‘die’ and raising you to myself” does indicate chronological order. The verse proves that God (exalted is he) is the agent who does these actions to Jesus. But as for *how* he does them and *when* he does them, judgment must be suspended until there is proof. What does have clear proof is that Jesus is alive now. And a report [*khabar*] on the authority of the Prophet (may God bless him and save him) states that Jesus “will return to earth and slay the Dajjāl.” Then God (exalted is he) will cause him to die [*yawataffāhu*] after that.
- 5) One interpretation, that of Abū Bakr al-Wāsiṭī, is that what is intended is “I am causing you to ‘die’ [*mutawaffika*] to your desires and to the gratifications of your soul [*huḏūz nafsika*]. Then he said “and raising you to myself.” This is because whoever does not become annihilated in relation to all that is not God [*man lam yaṣir fāniyan 'ammā siwā Allāh*] will not attain the stage [*maqām*] of knowledge of God. Also, when Jesus was raised to heaven, he became like the angels, with the cessation of desire and of anger and of blameworthy morals.
- 6) *Al-tawaffī* means taking a thing in its totality [*wāfiyan*]. Since God knew that there were some people who would think that what God raised was Jesus’ spirit, not his body, he mentioned these words to prove that Jesus (upon him blessing and peace) was raised in his entirety [*bi-tamāmihi*] to heaven, with both his spirit and his body...
- 7) “I am causing you to ‘die’ [*mutawaffika*],” that is, I will cause you to be like a dead man [*ka-l-mutawaffī*]. For if someone is raised to heaven and every trace of him is cut off from the earth, then he is like a dead man. Calling a thing by the name of something that resembles it in most of its characteristics and attributes is permissible and good.
- 8) *Al-tawaffī* means seizing [*al-qabḏ*]. People commonly say “So-and-so paid me back [*waffānī*] my money and repaid me in full [*awfānī*], and I exacted it [*tawaffaytuhā*] from him...”
- 9) This expression is elliptical, omitting an implied word: “causing your work to ‘die’” with the meaning of receiving your work in full, and “raising you to myself” with the meaning of raising your work to myself... What is intended

by this verse is that God (exalted is he) informed Jesus that he accepted his obedience and his works...

This is a complete list of the different senses in which this verse is interpreted by those who take it according to its outward, evident sense [*alā ḡāhirihā*].¹⁶

Al-Rāzī clearly considers all of the above to be legitimate options for interpretation within the Muslim community. Among them are some of the options which we have previously seen, such as:

- 1) actual, literal death and resurrection (#2 above), and
- 2) *wafāt=qabḡ* (#8 above).

There are also some interesting options which we have not previously seen, including:

- 1) bringing an end to your lifespan (#1 above),
- 2) agnosticism as to when and how the ‘dying’ and raising take place (#4 above),
- 3) taking totally in body and soul (#6 above), and
- 4) the Ṣūfī interpretation of al-Wāsiṡ that what is intended is a death to self and to carnal desires (#5 above).

After reviewing these options for interpretation according to the “outward sense”, al-Rāzī then returns as promised to the theory of modified chronology [*taqdīm wa-ta’khīr*]. He acknowledges that the word “and” [*wa*, not *fa*] does not necessarily imply chronological order. But he questions the necessity of imposing a chronological transposition when the text can be easily understood straightforwardly according to its natural, outward sense [*al-ḡāhir*]. He concludes:

¹⁶ Muḡammad Fakhr al-Dīn ibn al-‘Allāma ḡiyā’ al-Dīn ‘Umar Al-Rāzī, *Tafsīr al-Fakhr al-Rāzī, al-Mushtahir bi-l-Tafsīr al-Kabīr wa-Mafātīḡ al-Ghaib*, Khalīl Muḡyī al-Dīn al-Mais (ed.) (Beirut: Dar al-Fikr, 1990), loc. cit.

Note that the many possible interpretations which we have presented make it unnecessary to depart from the outward sense. But God knows best!¹⁷

Al-Rāzī also devotes considerable space to the substitution theory in connection with both Āl ‘Imrān (3):55 and Nisā’ (4):157. He seems to feel that some kind of substitution is the most natural way to understand Nisā’ (4):157¹⁸ (“They did not kill him, and they did not crucify him, but it was made to appear so to them [*shubbiha lahum*].” But he thinks that the substitution theory must answer some fairly serious grammatical and theological objections.

In his comments on al-Nisā’(4):157 Al-Rāzī presents the grammatical objection as follows:

What is the grammatical subject of the verb *shubbiha*? If you say that its subject is Christ, [this will not work because] he is not supposed to have been made to resemble someone else: he is the one whom someone else is supposed to have been made to resemble! [*huwa al-mushabbah bi-hī wa-laysa bi-mushabbah*] And if you say that its subject is the one who was killed, [this will not work] because there is no mention [in the text] of the one who was killed [so he cannot serve as grammatical antecedent to the verb *shubbiha*].

There are two possible answers:

- 1) The verb’s referent is the preposition and the object of the preposition [*al-jārr wa-l-majrūr*, i.e. the term “*lahum*”]. This is like the common expression “*khuyyila ilayhi*” (“he imagined”, or “it appeared to him”). So it is as though the text said “[They did not kill him, and they did not crucify him,] but confusion befell them.”
- 2) The subject of the verb is the [unexpressed] pronoun referring to the one who was killed, since God’s saying “they did not kill him” indicates that

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ In his comments on Āl ‘Imrān (3):55 he says, “The text of the Qur’ān indicates [*yadullu ‘alā*] that when God (exalted is he) raised Jesus, he cast his appearance onto someone else.” But in al-Rāzī’s comments on Nisā’ (4):157, as will be seen below, he seems less certain that this is the best way to interpret the verse.

killing happened to someone other than him, and that other person is “mentioned” in this way. So it is legitimate to make him the subject of *shubbiha*.¹⁹

It is worth noting that though answer #2 above presupposes that a substitution did take place, answer #1 does not. Answer #1 sees *shubbiha* as an impersonal passive meaning simply: “it appeared so to them” or “it was obscure/doubtful to them.”

Continuing his comments on al-Nisā’ (4):157 Al-Rāzī then presents his chief theological objection to the substitution theory and attempts to answer it:²⁰

If it were permissible to say that God (exalted is he) casts the appearance of one person onto another person, then this would open the door to sophistry. For if I see Zayd, perhaps it is not Zayd at all, but rather the appearance of Zayd has been cast onto this person! In that case neither marriage nor divorce nor property could continue to exist and be trusted. It would also lead to calling into question the idea of factual historical transmission [*al-tawātur*] because a report which is historically transmitted can contribute to knowledge only on condition that its ultimate source is something perceptible to the senses [*maḥsūs*]. If we allow this kind of confusion to take place in things perceptible to the senses, then it will discredit historical transmission, and that will necessarily call into question all laws [*sharā’i*]. One cannot reply to this objection that such things took place only in the time of the prophets (upon them blessing and peace); for we say that if what you have said is true, then that can only be known by evidence and proof. Anyone who does not know that evidence and that proof cannot assert anything with certainty on the basis of things perceptible to the senses, nor can he depend on any historically transmitted reports. Furthermore, even if in our day prophetic miracles [*mu’jizāt*] are blocked, the way of *karāmāt* [miraculous signs of divine favor] is still open. So the aforementioned possibility is still present in all ages. In sum: opening this door would of necessity discredit factual historical transmission. And discrediting that would of necessity discredit the prophethood of all prophets (upon them blessing and peace). So this branch would of necessity discredit the very roots. And *that* must be rejected.

¹⁹ Al-Rāzī, loc. cit.

²⁰ He lists other objections and attempts to answer them in his comments on Āl ‘Imrān (3):55.

The answer: The various schools of thought among scholars [*madhāhib al-'ulamā'*] have differed about this situation. They have mentioned several different interpretations:

[Here al-Rāzī lists five versions of the substitution theory of which he is aware:

- 1) The Jews deliberately crucified another person and lied about it,
- 2) A man named Ṭīṭāyus was sent by “Judas the chief of the Jews” to kill Jesus, but God caused Ṭīṭāyus to appear like Jesus, and he was crucified instead,
- 3) The man charged with guarding Jesus was caused to look like Jesus and was crucified in his place,
- 4) Jesus asked his twelve disciples for a volunteer, and one man volunteered and was made to look like Jesus and was crucified,
- 5) A hypocritical disciple who proposed to betray Jesus was caused to look like Jesus and was crucified.

Al-Rāzī's summarizes in the following words his opinion of these answers to the objection:]

These interpretations are mutually contradictory and incompatible with one another. God knows best what the facts are about these matters!²¹

Of all of the commentators whom this paper considers, Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī has by far the most detailed, accurate and interesting analysis of what eastern Christians believed about the death and resurrection of Christ. Both his analysis of Christian beliefs and his own comments on those beliefs are worth quoting at length. In his discussion of al-Nisā' (4):157, immediately following the discussion above, he discusses the statement in this verse that “those who have differed about it [i.e. the crucifixion] are in doubt about it.” He considers whether this refers to the Jews or to the Christians, and he has the following to say about the Christians:

²¹ Al-Rāzī, loc. cit.

All of the families of the Christians agree that the Jews killed him, but the largest groupings of Christians are three: the Nestorians, the Melkites²² and the Jacobites.²³

Regarding the Nestorians, they claim that Christ was crucified with respect to his humanity, not with respect to his divinity.

The view of most philosophers [*ḥukamā'*] is close to this statement. They say: Since it is established that a human being is not equivalent to this temple [i.e. the physical body], but is either a noble substance [*jism*] poured into this body [*badan*] or a spiritual/divine substance [*jawhar rūḥānī*] naked in its essence [*dhāt*] and conducting its affairs in this body [*badan*]. Thus the killing happened rather to this temple. As for the soul – which was in reality Jesus (upon him peace) – the killing did not happen to him.

One should not say, “Every human being is like this, so what meaning does this distinction have?” For we say that Jesus’ soul was holy, high, heavenly, strong in illumination [*ishrāq*] with the divine lights [*al-anwār al-ilāhiyya*], great in closeness to the spirits of the angels. And when the soul is like that, its suffering because of death and the destruction of the body [*badan*] is not great. And after it has been separated from the shade of the body, it will escape to the wide expanse of the heavens and the lights of the world of glory. Its joy and happiness there will be great. And it is known that these states do not occur in all people. From the beginning of the creation of Adam (upon him peace) until the consummation of the Day of Resurrection, they do not occur except with a few individuals. This is the significance of distinguishing Jesus (upon him peace) in this way.

Regarding the Melkites, they say: the killing and the crucifixion happened to [*waṣalā ilā*] the divinity in sense and in feeling, not in direct experience [*bi-l-mubāshara*].

And the Jacobites say: the killing and the crucifixion happened to Christ, who is a substance resulting from two substances [*jawhar mutawallid min jawharayn*].

²² That is, those who hold to the doctrine of the official Byzantine church.

²³ Muslim writers from this period used the term “Jacobite” as a catch-all term to describe all of the so-called “Monophysite” churches, not just the Syrian church which was loyal to the teaching of Jacob Baradaeus.

This is an explanation of the teachings of the Christians on this subject.²⁴

In a 1980 article, Mahmoud Ayoub suggests that al-Rāzī's comments here are an outstanding example of what he calls "the Qur'ānic spirit of conciliation and search for meaning beyond the mere facts of history."²⁵ He adds:

[Al-Rāzī's] statement goes a long way towards meeting the Qur'ānic challenge of Jesus, the Christ. It also provides a good starting point for Muslim-Christian understanding.²⁶

Incidentally, al-Rāzī's suggestion that Jesus has a dual nature – spiritual/heavenly [*rūḥānī*] and physical/earthly [*badanī*] is not solely a late, hellenizing innovation with no roots in authentically Islamic soil. The germ of this idea can be found in Ibn Ishāq – the earliest biographer of Muḥammad, to whom al-Rāzī referred earlier. Ibn Ishāq wrote that after Jesus instructed his disciples to carry God's commands to the whole world,

Then God raised him to Him and garbed him in feathers and dressed him in light and cut off his desire for food and drink, so he flew among the angels, and he was with them around the throne. He was human and angelic, heavenly and earthly.²⁷

²⁴ Al-Rāzī, loc. cit.

²⁵ Mahmoud Ayoub, "Towards an Islamic Christology, II: The Death of Jesus, Reality or Delusion (A Study of the Death of Jesus in Tafsīr Literature)," in *The Muslim World*, vol. LXX, No. 2 (Hartford: The Hartford Seminary Foundation, April, 1980), p. 105.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Gordon Darnell Newby (ed.), The Making of the Last Prophet : A Reconstruction of the Earliest Biography of Muhammad (Columbia : University of South Carolina Press, 1989), p. 210.

Al-Qurṭubī

Abū ‘Abd Allāh al-Qurṭubī (d. 671/1272) is the author of one of the most respected Qur’ān commentaries in the tradition of *tafsīr bi-l-ma ‘thūr*.²⁸ Al-Qurṭubī reports many of the same traditions of which al-Ṭabarī was aware, and also some of which his predecessor was not aware. But unlike al-Ṭabarī, al-Qurṭubī provides few complete isnāds, focusing instead on the content [*matn*] of the traditions. Furthermore, despite his opposition to *tafsīr bi-l-ra ‘y*,²⁹ we will see below that he did not hesitate to argue for one interpretation over another on grounds of reason, rather than on soundness of isnād.

Al-Qurṭubī is aware of traditions supporting several different exegetical theories, including the following:

- 1) nonchronological ordering [*taqdīm wa-ta ‘khīr*],
- 2) seizing [*qabḍ*] from earth to heaven,
- 3) literal death and resurrection,
- 4) sleep, and
- 5) substitution.

He does not like the theory that Jesus literally died and rose because he thinks that it presents certain logical difficulties for the traditions about Jesus’ return at the end of time

²⁸ He explicitly rejects the idea of *tafsīr bi-l-ra ‘y*. Cf. Roger Arnaldez, “Al-Ḳurṭubī, Abū ‘Abd Allāh,” in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd edition. Leiden (E.J. Brill, 1960-), p. 513.

²⁹ Ibid.

to kill the Dajjāl. Nonetheless al-Qurṭubī feels bound to report it as being one of the options supported by some in the Muslim community on the basis of the ḥadīth.

Thus, commenting on Āl ‘Imrān (3):55, Al-Qurṭubī lists the following theories as having support in the traditions:

- 1) One group of exegetes [*ahl al-ma ‘ānī*] (including al-Daḥḥāk and al-Farrā’) have spoken about His saying (exalted is He) “I am causing you to ‘die’ [*mutawaffika*] and raising you to myself,” in terms of a chronological shift [*taqdīm wa-ta’khīr*] because the word “and” does not necessarily imply chronological order [*rutba*]. So the meaning is: I am raising you to myself and cleansing you of the unbelievers, and I will cause you to die [*mutawaffika*] after you descend from heaven...
- 2) Al-Ḥasan and Ibn Jurayj said that the meaning of “I am causing you to ‘die’ [*mutawaffika*]” is: I am seizing you [*qābiḍuka*] and raising you to heaven without death, like the expression “I have exacted the full share of [*tawaffaytu*] my money from so-and-so,” i.e. I have seized it.
- 3) Wahb ibn Munabbih said, “God caused Jesus (upon him peace) to die [*tawaffā*] for three hours of a day, then raised him to heaven. There is some difficulty [*bu’d*] about this, for there are sound reports [*akhbār*] from the Prophet (may God bless him and save him) about Jesus’ return to kill the Dajjāl. See what we have shown in our book *Al-Tadhkira* and in the preceding and coming material in this book.
- 4) Ibn Zayd said, “Causing you to ‘die’ [*mutawaffika*] means seizing you [*qābiḍuka*]: ‘causing you to ‘die’ [*mutawaffika*]’ and ‘raising you’ are the same thing. He had not yet died.
- 5) Ibn Ṭalḥa recounted from Ibn ‘Abbās: “The meaning of ‘causing you to ‘die’ [*mutawaffika*]’ is causing your literal death [*mumītuka*].
- 6) Al-Rabī’ ibn Anas: “It is the ‘death’ [*wafāt*] of sleep.” God (exalted is he) said, “It is he who causes you to die [*tawaffā*] at night,” that is, causes you to sleep since sleep is the brother of death. As the Prophet said (may God bless him and save him) when he was asked whether there is sleep in paradise: “No: sleep is the brother of death, and there is no death in paradise.” This was set forth by al-Dāraqūṭnī.

- 7) It is sound [*ṣahīḥ*] that God (exalted is he) raised him without death [*wafāt*] or sleep, as al-Ḥasan and Ibn Zayd said. This was the choice of al-Ṭabarī, and it is a sound [*ṣahīḥ*] report from Ibn ‘Abbās, and al-Ḍaḥḥāk said it. Al-Ḍaḥḥāk said, “The story is that when the Jews wanted to kill Jesus, the disciples [*ḥawāriyyūn*] assembled together in a room (they were twelve men), and Christ entered the room through the lamp-niche. Iblīs informed the Jews, and 4,000 of them rode there and besieged the door of the room. Christ said to the disciples, “Which of you will go out and be killed and be with me in paradise? One man said, “I, O prophet of God.” So he put on him a tunic of wool and a turban of wool, and he gave him his staff and cast onto him the appearance of Jesus. Then he went out to the Jews, and they killed him and crucified him. As for Christ, God clothed him with feathers, and robed him with light, and cut off from him the desire for food and drink, and he flew with the angels.³⁰
- 8) [Al-Qurṭubī’s eighth option is another substitution story like # 7 above, but with different details.]³¹

Thus al-Qurṭubī reports five different interpretation theories which had currency in the Muslim community: nonchronological ordering (#1 above), “*wafāt=qabḍ*” (#2 and #4 above), literal death and resurrection (#3 and #5 above), “*wafat=sleep*” (#6 above), and substitution (#7 and #8 above).

Option #8 above is the only option where al-Qurṭubī provides a full isnād, rather than just naming the person to whom it is attributed. Given this, and given that he devotes more space to options #7 and #8 than to the other options, it would appear that al-Qurṭubī preferred the substitution theory. In his comments on al-Nisā’ (4):157 he again mentions

³⁰ Note that we have previously seen this last sentence on the authority of Ibn Ishāq (p. 16 above), but al-Qurṭubī (or his source) has omitted the continuation according to which Jesus was “human and angelic, heavenly and earthly.”

³¹ Abū ‘Abd Allāh Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad al-Anṣārī al-Qurṭubī, *Al-Jāmi’ li-Aḥkām al-Qur’ān*. Muḥammad Ibrāhīm al-Ḥafnāwī (ed.) (Cairo: Dar al-Ḥadīth, 1994), loc. cit.

the substitution theory very briefly, referring the reader to the comments we have just seen on Āl ‘Imrān (3):55. Despite his preference for the substitution theory, al-Qurṭubī acknowledges that the other theories have legitimate support within the Muslim community.

In commenting on al-Mā’ida (5):117, al-Qurṭubī again notes the theory of literal death and resurrection (he uses the ambiguous word *wafāt* but the context makes clear that he means literal death). As in Āl ‘Imrān above, even as he feels an obligation to report the persistence of this theory, he objects to it himself because he thinks that it is logically inconsistent with a belief that Jesus will return at the end of time to kill the Dajjāl. He writes:

“When you caused me to ‘die’ [*tawaffaytanī*] you were their Overseer”: It has been said that this proves that God (mighty and glorious is He) caused caused him to die [*tawaffāhu*] before He raised him. But there is nothing to this because the reports [*akhbār*] clearly show that he was raised, and that he is in heaven alive, and that he will return and will kill the Dajjāl, on the basis of what is clearly shown. Rather, the meaning is “When you raised me to heaven.” Al-Ḥasan said, “The word *wafāt* is used in the Book of God according to three senses:

- 1) the *wafāt* of literal death [*mawt*], which appears in His saying (exalted is He) “God causes souls to die [*yatawaffā*] at the time of their death [*mawt*], meaning “at the time of the end of their lifespan [*ajal*]”; and
- 2) the *wafāt* of sleep, as when God (exalted is He) said “It is he who causes you to ‘die’ [*yatawaffākum*] at night, meaning “causes you to sleep”; and
- 3) the *wafāt* of raising up, as when God (exalted is He) said “O Jesus, I am causing you to ‘die’ [*mutawaffka*].³²

³² Ibid., loc. cit.

Al-Bayḍāwī

This paper does not examine the commentary of al-Zamakhsharī, with the brilliant philological and grammatical erudition which he brought to bear on the interpretation of the Qur’ān. The reason for this omission is that we are focusing on mainstream Sunnī commentaries. Though later “orthodox” (i.e. Ash’arite) Sunnī writers expressed admiration for al-Zamakhsharī’s linguistic scholarship, they also expressed strong warnings over the way in which he used to Qur’ān to argue “in favor of the pernicious doctrines of the Mu’tazila.”³³

Nevertheless al-Zamakhsharī’s ideas (purged of most of his Mu’tazilism) can be found in the commentary of Nāṣir al-Dīn Abū Sa’īd ‘Abd Allāh Al-Bayḍāwī (d. 685/1286 or 691/1291). Al-Bayḍāwī’s commentary, which is “largely a condensed and amended edition of al-Zamakhsharī’s *Kashshāf*,”³⁴ is better known and more widely read by Muslims today because of its handy size, and because it repudiates al-Zamakhsharī’s Mu’tazilite views. Yet it would be a mistake to imply that al-Bayḍāwī did nothing more than rework the *Kashshāf*. Al-Bayḍāwī was clearly also familiar with the other major

³³ This quotation from Ibn Khaldūn, quoted in McAuliffe, op. cit., p. 52, is one example of many such warnings from Sunnī writers.

³⁴ J. Robson, “Al-Bayḍāwī,” in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd edition (Leiden, E.J. Brill, 1960-).

commentaries which had preceded his own. Al-Bayḍāwī's commentary is certainly among the most popular and well-trusted in the world today.

In keeping with his crisp, handbook-like style, al-Bayḍāwī frequently simply lists all of the various legitimate interpretations of a given verse, without indicating either the origin of each option or which of them he prefers. Such is the case with his comments on Āl-'Imrān (3):55:³⁵

- “O Jesus, I am causing you to ‘die’ [*mutawaffika*].” That is,
- 1) bringing an end to your lifespan and bringing you to the appointed end of your lifespan, protecting you from their killing, or
 - 2) seizing you [*qābiḍuka*] from the earth, as in the expression “I exacted [*tawaffaytu*] my money,” or
 - 3) causing you to ‘die’ [*mutawaffika*] sleeping, since it is recounted [*ruwiya*] that he raised him sleeping, or
 - 4) causing you to die [*mumītuka*] to the desires which hinder you from ascending to the world of the heavenly realm,
 - 5) and it is said that God literally caused him to die [*amātaḥu*] for seven hours and then [*thumma*] raised him to heaven. And this is the view of the Christians.³⁶

Thus he lists as legitimate interpretations several of the theories we have already seen: 1) ending your lifespan, 2) *wafāt=qabḍ*, 3) sleep, 4) death to earthly desires, and 5) actual, literal death and resurrection.

³⁵ I have added the numbers and paragraph breaks in this quotation.

³⁶ Nāṣir al-Dīn abū Sa'īd 'Abd Allāh ibn 'Umar ibn Muḥammad al-Shīrāzī al-Bayḍāwī, *Tafsīr al-Bayḍāwī al-Musammā Anwār al-Tanzīl wa-Asrār al-Ta'wīl* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 1988), loc. cit.

On al-Mā'ida (5):117 al-Bayḍāwī comments:

“When you caused me to ‘die’ [*tawaffāytanī*],” i.e. by raising to heaven, in accordance with His saying “I am causing you to ‘die’ [*mutawaffika*] and raising you.” The verb *tawaffā* means to take something totally [*wāfiyan*], and death [*al-mawt*] is one kind of this. God (exalted is He) says: “God causes souls to ‘die’ [*yatawaffā al-anfus*] at the time of their death [*mawt*], and in their sleep those who have not died.”³⁷

In his discussion of al-Nisā' (4):157 al-Bayḍāwī also mentions a group of people [*qawm*] (the context suggests that they are Christians or Jews, not Muslims) who hold the view that “the human nature [*nāsūt*] was crucified and the divine nature [*lāhūt*] ascended.”³⁸

Al-Bayḍāwī is also aware of the substitution theory and of the traditions which support it. In his comments on al-Nisā' (4):157 he reports two versions of the substitution theory: 1) Jesus asked the disciples for a volunteer to take his place when he knew that the Jews were coming to kill him in revenge for God's having turned a band of Jewish revilers into apes and pigs, or 2) a Jew named Ṭīṭānus was the victim. In addition to these two versions of the substitution story, Al-Bayḍāwī adds that he knows of stories of “other similar unusual miracles [*khawāriq*] which would not be out of the question [*lā tustab'adu*] in the age of the prophets.”³⁹

³⁷ Al-Bayḍāwī, loc. cit. The qur'ānic reference quoted is al-Zumar (39):42.

³⁸ Ibid., loc. cit.

³⁹ Ibid.

Nevertheless al-Bayḍāwī raises two serious problems with the substitution theory. The first problem is theological, having to do with how one may properly predicate deceit as an attribute of God; and the second problem is grammatical, having to do with commentators' confusion over the subject of the passive verb *shubbiha*.

In commenting on Āl 'Imrān (3):54, al-Bayḍāwī argues the following:

Deception [*al-makr*], insofar as it is (at the root) a ruse which brings harm to another person, cannot be predicated of God [*lā yusnadu ilā Allāh*] (exalted is he), except by way of requital and reciprocity [*al-muqābala wa-l-izdiwāj*].⁴⁰

For this reason al-Bayḍāwī thinks that any substitution theory, in order to be plausible, must necessarily assume that the person who was crucified was himself guilty of “seeking to kill Jesus [*qaṣada ightiyālahu*].”⁴¹ Of course this objection does not require al-Bayḍāwī to reject the substitution theory *as such*, but it does imply a rejection of the large majority of the traditional *versions* of that theory (including those with relatively stronger isnāds), in which an innocent man (one of Jesus' disciples, or Sergius, or Simon of Cyrene, or an anonymous passer-by, etc.) was unjustly crucified as a result of the deception. The versions in which a guilty man like Judas Iscariot was crucified have relatively weak support in the ḥadīth.

Incidentally Mahmoud Ayoub, “writing from within the [Muslim] community,”⁴² agrees with this theological critique of the substitution theory. He adds:

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Mahmoud Ayoub, 1980, p. 91.

The substitutionist theory will not do, regardless of its form or purpose. First, it makes a mockery of divine justice and the primordial covenant of God with humanity, to guide human history to its final fulfillment.⁴³ Would it be in consonance with God's covenant, his mercy and justice, to deceive humanity for so many centuries?⁴⁴... It makes historical Christianity based on a divine deception which was not disclosed until the Qur'ān was revealed centuries later.⁴⁵

Al-Bayḍāwī's second objection to the substitution theory is grammatical. In commenting on al-Nisā' (4):157 ("it was made to appear so to them" [*shubbiha lahum*]), after reporting two versions of the substitution story, he argues:

The verb *shubbiha* is a grammatical predicate referring to [*musnad ilā*] the preposition and the object of the preposition [*al-jārr wa-l-majrūr*], as though it said "confusion [*tashbīh*] befell them between Jesus and the person killed," or "confusion befell them in the matter." This accords with the statement of those who say that "No one was killed, but a false rumor arose and spread among the people."⁴⁶

Al-Bayḍāwī is echoing here a grammatical argument previously made by al-Zamakhsharī,⁴⁷ and it is essentially the same as the grammatical objection raised by al-Rāzī. Al-Zamakhsharī argues along the following lines: The verb *shubbiha* must be an impersonal passive. If the subject of this passive verb were Jesus, then it would mean that Jesus was caused to resemble someone else. But that is the reverse of what the

⁴³ Ayoub has a footnote here: "S. 7:172; 2:38."

⁴⁴ Ayoub, 1980, p. 104.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 97.

⁴⁶ Al-Bayḍāwī, loc. cit.

⁴⁷ Mahmoud Ayoub, 1980, p. 101. I am dependent on Ayoub here for his summary of al-Zamakhsharī's grammatical argument.

substitution stories relate: Jesus was not caused to resemble someone else; someone else is supposed to have been made to resemble Jesus.⁴⁸ And the subject of the passive verb *shubbiha* cannot be the substitute who was killed [*al-maqtūl*], because that person is not mentioned in the Qur’ān, so cannot serve grammatically as an antecedent subject.

Therefore *shubbiha*, as grammatical predicate, must refer to the preposition “to” and its object “them” [*lahum*]. It must be an impersonal passive meaning “they were made to imagine it,” or “the matter was made to appear so to them,” or “the matter was made obscure/doubtful to them.” Al-Bayḍāwī’s brief grammatical remarks, quoted above, are a condensation of this argument of al-Zamakhsharī.

In view of al-Bayḍāwī’s grammatical and theological objections to the substitution theory, one wonders what “tone of voice” or nuance he intended behind his remark that the various and diverse substitution stories describe “unusual miracles which would not be out of the question in the age of the prophets” [*al-khawāriq al-latī lā tustab’adu fī zamān al-nubuwwa*]. Certainly such supernatural acts are not out of the question: God is *able* to do them. But, in reading stories according to which God turned Jewish enemies into apes and pigs or caused seventeen disciples all to look and sound identically like Jesus while Jesus flew through an aperture which opened in the roof,

⁴⁸ I note, however that it *would* be consonant with the theory that Jesus lost consciousness on the cross and thus was caused to appear to die. It would also be consonant with the theory that Jesus did actually die on the cross, but that his death only appeared to be the result of the crucifixion, whereas in fact it was God who caused him to die. In this connection, note the theology of al-Anfāl (8):17: “You did not kill them, but God killed them, and you did not throw (your spear) when you threw, but rather God threw” [*lam taqtulūhum wa-lākinna Allāh qatala, wa-mā ramayta idh ramayta wa-lākinna Allāh ramā*].

perhaps al-Bayḍāwī wondered whether it is plausible that God *would* do such a thing, in view of what the Qur’ān says elsewhere about God’s character. Al-Ṭabarī’s editor does not hesitate to state that some of these kinds of ḥadīths are spurious “fables” [*asāṭīr*].⁴⁹

Sayyid Quṭb

Sayyid Quṭb wrote what is perhaps the most widely-known Sunnī commentary of the twentieth century. It has been very influential despite (or perhaps because of) the author’s lack of formal theological training at al-Azhar. A leader of the Muslim Brothers [*al-Ikhwān al-Muslimūn*] until his execution at the hands of the Egyptian government in 1966, he was clearly more concerned to refute the errors of Christianity than to seek common theological ground with Christians.⁵⁰ He is vigorous in denouncing Christian “deification” of Jesus.

When it comes to the crucifixion of Jesus, however, he insists on agnosticism. This certainly does not mean that he would be prepared to attribute any redemptive significance to Jesus’ death and rising if they did actually take place. But he does insist that the historical question is an open one, and that we cannot know for certain the “when” or “how” of Jesus’ death and rising.

⁴⁹ Ṣalāḥ ‘Abd al-Fattāḥ al-Khālīdī, Introduction to Abū Ja’far Muḥammad ibn Jarīr Al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī: Jāmi’ al-Bayān ‘an Ta’wīl Āy al-Qur’ān* (Damascus: Dār al-Qalam, 1997), vol. 1, p. 12 et passim.

⁵⁰ I have watched on videotape a number of his lectures which were devoted to refutation of the “*inhirāfāt*” of the Christians and the Jews, which he saw as a threat to the integrity of Islam.

In taking this position, he echoes another modern commentary, Rashīd Riḍā's *Tafsīr al-Manār*. Rashīd Riḍā writes an extended polemic in which he refutes the Christian theological view that Jesus' death and resurrection atoned for the sins of the world, reconciling divine justice and divine mercy. He is clear, however, that his dispute with Christians is over the theological significance which they attribute to the crucifixion, not over the historical event itself. Thus he writes, "The actual fact of the crucifixion is not itself a matter which the Book of God seeks to affirm or deny, except for the purpose of asserting the killing of prophets by the Jews unjustly, and reproaching them for that act."⁵¹

Sayyid Quṭb takes a similarly agnostic view on the historical question of when and how Jesus died and rose. Commenting on Āl 'Imrān (3):55, he writes:

As for how his "death" [*wafāt*] came about, and how his being raised came about, these are mysterious matters [*umūr ghaybiyya*] which fall into the category of obscure verses [*mutashābihāt*] whose exegesis no one knows but God. There is no use in trying to get to the bottom of them, either in doctrine or in law. Those who chase after them and make them into a matter for dispute will only end up falling into a state of doubt and confusion and complexity, without coming to any certainty in truth and without being able to rest their minds in a matter which must be entrusted to the knowledge of God.⁵²

Commenting on al-Nisā' (4):157, he says that "the Jews say that they killed him... and the Christians say that Jesus was crucified and buried and rose from the dead after

⁵¹ Sayyid Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā, *Tafsīr al-Manār* (Cairo: Dār al-Manār, 1367), 2nd edition, VI, 18, cited in Mahmoud Ayoub (1980), op. cit., p. 114.

⁵² Ibrāhīm Ḥusayn Shādhilī Sayyid Quṭb, *Fī Zilāl al-Qur'ān: ṭab'a jadīda mashrū'a tuḍamminu idāfāt wa-tanqīhāt tarakahā al-mu'allif wa-tunsharu li-l-marra al-ūlā* (Beirut: Dār al-Mashriq, 1973), loc. cit.

three days, and ‘history’⁵³ is silent about the birth of Christ and his end.”⁵⁴ Sayyid Quṭb argues that it is impossible to be certain about these things.

This is perhaps the place to note that Jews today certainly do *not* say that they crucified Jesus. This is not because they do not think that Jesus died on the cross, but because they would argue (and Christians agree) that it was the Romans, not the Jews, who crucified Jesus.⁵⁵

Sayyid Quṭb then reviews the New Testament accounts on the subject, using the interesting terminology “*yarwī*” (recounts), “*riwāya*” (account), “*khabar*” (report) and “*tarjuḥu*” (is more probable, has more support). This is the same terminology which the classical commentators (see al-Ṭabarī above, for example) use to refer to Islamic traditional accounts attributed to the Prophet, Companions and Followers. Implicitly he seems to treat the New Testament text as being in the category of ḥadīth whose reliability should be assessed on the basis of its chain of transmission from the apostolic generation.

He casts doubt on the isnād of the New Testament accounts, suggesting that the accounts which Christians have accepted as canonical were chosen for “reasons which

⁵³ Quotation marks are his.

⁵⁴ Sayyid Quṭb, *ibid.*, loc. cit.

⁵⁵ Though the New Testament is clear that it was the Romans who did the crucifying, it also suggests that both religion and state were complicit in the act, in the persons of the high-priests Annas and Caiaphas and the secular governor Pontius Pilate. Most Christians today would see this not as an indictment of either Jews or Italians as ethnic groups, but, if anything, as an indictment of human religious and political systems in general. Christians would also note the statement of Jesus in John 10:18: “No one takes my life from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This command I received from [God].” According to the New Testament, Jesus is understood as having *voluntarily* given up his life on the cross to atone for the sins of the world.

are not above doubt.”⁵⁶ But he does not absolutely reject the New Testament accounts as false. He also mentions the contrasting story in the so-called “Gospel of Barnabas,”⁵⁷ but he does not attempt to assess whether “Barnabas” constitutes a reliable account. The main point which he wishes to underline is what he states as his conclusion on the matter:

Thus the scholar cannot find any certain report [*khobar yaqīn*] about this event... nor can those who differ about it find any support which would make one account [*riwāya*] more plausible [*yurajjihū*] over another account [*riwāwa*].⁵⁸

He then turns to his interpretation of the Qur’ān’s statement in al-Nisā’ (4):158 that God “raised” Jesus [*rafa’ahu*]:

The Qur’ān does not offer details about this raising. Was it a raising of both body and spirit in a state of being alive? Or was it a raising of the spirit only after death [*wafāt*]? And when did this death [*wafāt*] take place, and where? They did not kill him, and they did not crucify him; rather the killing and the crucifixion happened to someone who was obscure to them [*man shubbiha lahum*] without him. The Qur’ān does not offer any other details behind this fact, except what appears in His saying (exalted is He) “O Jesus, I am causing you to ‘die’ [*mutawaffika*] and raising you to myself.” This verse, like the one we have been discussing, does not give details about the death [*wafāt*], nor about the nature of this ‘dying’ [*tawaffī*] and its timing. In keeping with our method, “in the shelter of the Qur’ān,”⁵⁹ we do not wish to come out from under that shelter, nor to wander about in sayings and fables for which we have no proof.⁶⁰

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Mahmoud Ayyoub, in his 1980 article (op. cit.) p. 112, points out, “This is most probably a late work, written under Islamic influence.” In fact it was almost certainly first penned by a Christian convert to Islam in the 14th century in Latin, and it contains quotations from Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, but to review the evidence on this would be beyond the scope of this paper.

⁵⁸ Sayyid Quṭb, op. cit.

⁵⁹ This is the title of Sayyid Quṭb’s whole commentary.

⁶⁰ Sayyid Quṭb, op. cit.

In his discussion of al-Mā'ida (5):117 Sayyid Quṭb again expresses agnosticism, but seems to suggest more clearly that he is inclined to think that Jesus really did die and rise. He writes:

The outward, evident meaning [*ẓāhir*] of the qur'ānic texts indicates [*yufīdu*] that God (exalted is He) caused Jesus son of Mary to die [*tawaffā*], and then [*thumma*] raised him to Himself. Some traditions [*al-āthār*] indicate [*tufīdu*] that he is alive with God. As far as I can see, there is no contradiction which would raise any problem between the idea that God caused him to die [*tawaffāhu*] from the life of the earth and the idea that he is alive with Him. After all, martyrs similarly die on earth and are alive with God. As to what form their life with Him takes, we do not know any “how” about it [*lā nadrī lahā kayfan*]. Similarly we do not know what form the life of Jesus (upon him peace) takes .⁶¹

Sayyid Quṭb is apparently alluding here to the qur'ānic command in al-Baqara (2):154: “Do not say of those who are killed in the service of God, ‘They are dead.’ Rather, they are living, but you do not perceive.” And in Āl ‘Imrān (3):169: “Do not consider those who have been killed in the service of God to be dead. Rather, they are alive with their Lord.”

In his comments on Maryam (19):33 Sayyid Quṭb writes:

The text is unequivocal [*ṣarīḥ*] here regarding the death [*mawt*] and resurrection [*ba'th*] of Jesus. It leaves no room for explaining-away [*ta'wīl*] or for dispute.

Conclusion

⁶¹ Ibid., loc. cit. Note that Sayyid Quṭb penned these words about martyrs during an imprisonment which ended in his own execution.

Did Jesus die on the cross and then rise from the dead? The foregoing discussion and analysis show what a rich and diverse range of answers to this question have historically been seen as legitimately supported within the Muslim community. Throughout the centuries there has never been just one, single “correct” Islamic answer to the question of whether Jesus died on the cross. Indeed, as the wide-ranging and erudite reflections of the commentators have shown, it is not just a simple “yes-or-no” question. Among the varied answers which Muslims have given through the centuries, I believe that there is much more room to find common ground with Christians than is generally supposed by either Muslims or Christians today.

A partial list of the interpretations which we have found in the major commentaries includes the following:

- 1) the substitution theory,
- 2) the sleep theory (including loss of consciousness on the cross),
- 3) *wafāt=qabd* (with various interpretations of what God “seized” and when),
- 4) chronological transposition, with eschatological death and resurrection,
- 5) God “brought an end to Jesus’ earthly lifespan,”
- 6) God “took Jesus totally, in body and soul,”
- 7) agnosticism as to when and how the dying and rising take place
- 8) the Sūfī vision of death to self and to carnal desires,
- 9) “Like the martyrs, Jesus died a real death, but is alive with God,” and
- 10) real, literal death and resurrection.

Of course these interpretations are not all mutually exclusive. For example, one might hold #3, #5 and #6 simultaneously as different ways of saying the same thing.

What implications does this have for Muslim-Christian dialogue? Option #10 will of course be readily seen as having common ground with Christians. But #3, #5, #6, and

#9 all might also be understood in ways that might suggest common ground. These might serve as starting-points for Muslim-Christian dialogue on the question.

It must be acknowledged that option #10 – a real, literal death and resurrection – does not necessarily require that that death took place on the cross. For example God might have caused Jesus to die and raised Jesus to heaven *before* substituting someone else who was crucified in Jesus' place.

In fact some Western scholars seem to take for granted that this death *cannot* be understood as having taken place on the cross, though they offer little evidence for this assumption. For example, Neal Robinson writes, “It is almost certainly wrong to deduce from any of these reports [i.e. from ḥadīths which report literal death and rising] that God caused Jesus to die *on the cross* [emphasis his].”⁶² Similarly Josef Henninger writes that the Muslim commentators “haben verschiedene Auswege ausgedacht: [z.b.:] Gott habe Jesus zwar vor dem Kreuztode bewahrt, aber eines natürlichen Todes sterben lassen und ihn dann nach kurzer Zeit, etwa nach einigen Stunden, wieder von den Toten erweckt.”⁶³ Roger Arnaldez makes the same assumption: “Selon d’autres exégètes, il s’agit bien d’une mort (*mawt*). [Arnaldez gives as examples two ḥadīths supporting literal death and resurrection] Ces traditions ne sont ici alléguées qu’en faveur de la thèse de la mort du Christ, précédant sa résurrection et son élévation au ciel. Évidemment, il n’est pas question pour les musulmans de la crucifixion.”⁶⁴

⁶² Robinson, op. cit., p. 121.

⁶³ Josef Henninger, *Spuren christlicher Glaubenswahrheiten im Koran* (Schöneck, Switzerland: Administration der Neuen Zeitschrift für Missionswissenschaft, 1951), p. 26.

⁶⁴ Arnaldez, op. cit., p. 189.

Évidemment? I disagree. I see no evidence that the Muslim commentators made the same assumption. When al-Bayḍāwī includes the possibility of literal death and resurrection on his list of legitimate interpretations of Āl ‘Imrān (3):55, he adds (almost as an afterthought), “and this is the view of the Christians.”⁶⁵ He is well-enough informed about Christian beliefs to know that what he is implying is the possibility of death on the cross and resurrection afterward. The other commentators who mention real death and resurrection do not refer explicitly to the Christian view, but the context and tone of their remarks seems to imply that they are talking about death on the cross, and they certainly say nothing that would *exclude* the cross as the location of the literal death.

Equally intriguing is Al-Rāzī’s tentative exploration of the idea that Jesus had an earthly nature which died on the cross and a heavenly nature which suffered death only with regard to its union with the earthly nature. I agree with Mahmoud Ayoub’s suggestion this constructive effort by al-Rāzī might make an excellent starting-point for discussion between Muslims and Christians.⁶⁶

In any case it should be clear that there is plenty of room to explore common ground in the multiple different interpretation options which the Muslim commentary tradition has preserved throughout the centuries. This rich and diverse exegetical heritage invites us to embark upon that exploration.

⁶⁵ Al-Bayḍāwī, loc. cit.

⁶⁶ Ayoub, 1980, p. 105.

Bibliography

- Anawati, G.C. "Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī," in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd edition. Leiden, E.J. Brill, 1960- .
- Arnaldez, Roger. *Jésus : Fils de Marie, prophète de l'Islam*. Paris : Desclée, 1980.
- _____ "Al-Ḳurṭubī, Abū 'Abd Allāh," in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd edition. Leiden, E.J. Brill, 1960- .
- Ayoub, Mahmoud. "Towards an Islamic Christology: An Image of Jesus in Early Shī'ī Muslim Literature," in *The Muslim World*, vol. LXVI, No. 3. Hartford: The Hartford Seminary Foundation, July, 1976.
- _____ "Towards an Islamic Christology, II: The Death of Jesus, Reality or Delusion (A Study of the Death of Jesus in Tafṣīr Literature)," in *The Muslim World*, vol. LXX, No. 2. Hartford: The Hartford Seminary Foundation, April, 1980.
- Al-Bayḍāwī, Naṣīr al-Dīn abū Sa'īd 'Abd Allāh ibn 'Umar ibn Muḥammad al-Shīrāzī. *Tafṣīr al-Bayḍāwī al-Musammā Anwār al-Tanzīl wa-Asrār al-Ta'wīl*. Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 1988.
- Charfī, Abdelmajīd. "Christianity in the Qur'ān Commentary of Ṭabarī," in *Islamochristiana*, vol. 6, pp. 105-148. Rome: PISAI, 1980.
- Cragg, Kenneth. *The Call of the Minaret* (second edition, revised and enlarged). Ibadan: Daystar Press, 1985.
- _____ *Jesus and the Muslim: An Exploration*. London: George Allen & Unwin, 1985.
- Henninger, Josef. *Spuren christlicher Glaubenswahrheiten im Koran*. Schöneck, Switzerland: Administration der Neuen Zeitschrift für Missionswissenschaft, 1951.
- Jadīd, Iskandar. *Al-Ṣalīb fī al-Injīl wa-l-Qur'ān*. Beirut: Markaz al-Shabība, n.d.

- Jansen, J.J.G. "Sayyid Ẓuṭb," in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd edition. Leiden, E.J. Brill, 1960- .
- McAuliffe, Jane Dammen. *Qur'ānic Christians: An Analysis of Classical and Modern Exegesis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991.
- Muqātil b. Sulaymān. *Tafsīr Muqātil ibn Sulaymān*. 'Abd Allāh Maḥmūd Shaḥāteh (ed.). Cairo: al-Hay'a al-Miṣriyya al-'Āmma li al-Kitāb, 1979.
- Newby, Gordon Darnell (ed.). *The Making of the Last Prophet : A Reconstruction of the Earliest Biography of Muhammad*. Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1989.
- Paret, Rudi. *Der Koran: Kommentar und Konkordanz*. W. Kohlhammer Verlag, 1977 (4. Auflage – 1989).
- Paret, Rudi. *Der Koran: Übersetzung*. Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer Verlag, 1979 (7. Auflage – 1996).
- Al-Qurṭubī, Abū 'Abd Allāh Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad al-Anṣārī. *Al-Jāmi' li-Aḥkām al-Qur'ān*. Muḥammad Ibrāhīm al-Ḥafnāwī (ed.). Cairo: Dar al-Ḥadīth, 1994.
- Räisänen Heikki, "The Portrait of Jesus in the Qur'ān: Reflections of a Biblical Scholar," in *The Muslim World*, vol. LXX, No. 2. Hartford: The Hartford Seminary Foundation, April, 1980.
- Al-Rāzī, Muḥammad Fakhr al-Dīn ibn al-'Allāma Ḍiyā' al-Dīn 'Umar. *Tafsīr al-Fakhr al-Rāzī, al-Mushtahir bi-l-Tafsīr al-Kabīr wa-Mafātīḥ al-Ghaib*. Khalīl Muḥyī al-Dīn al-Mais (ed.). Beirut: Dar al-Fikr, 1990.
- Robson, J. "Al-Bayḍāwī, 'Abd Allāh," in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd edition. Leiden, E.J. Brill, 1960- .
- Robinson, Neal. *Christ in Islam and Christianity*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991.
- Sayyid Quṭb, Ibrāhīm Ḥusayn Shādhilī. *Fī Zilāl al-Qur'ān (ṭab'a jadīda mashrū'a tuḍamminu idāfāt wa-tanqīḥāt taraka-hā al-mu'allif wa-tunsharu li-l-marra al-ūlā)*. Beirut: Dār al-Mashriq, 1973.

Al-Ṭabarī, Abū Ja'far Muḥammad ibn Jarīr. *Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī: Jāmi' al-Bayān 'an Ta'wīl Āy al-Qur'ān*. Ṣalāḥ 'Abd al-Fattāḥ al-Khālidī (ed.). Damascus: Dār al-Qalam, 1997.

Wehr, Hans. *A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic*. J. Milton Cowan (ed. & transl.), third edition. Ithaca: Spoken Language Services, 1976.

Zahniser, A.H. Mathias, "The Forms of Tawaffā in the Qur'ān: A Contribution to Muslim-Christian Dialogue," in *The Muslim World*, Vol. LXXIX, No. 1. Hartford: The Hartford Seminary Foundation, January, 1989.