

CHAPTER 13

ASCENSION

The legend of the Ascension is the result of a gradual glorification of the Lord. At first there was some confusion, because Jesus had himself told one of the thieves, who had been crucified with him:

Verily I say unto thee: Today shalt thou be with me in paradise.¹

Relying on this prophecy, the Gospel of Peter asserted an immediate ascension.² We also read in the Epistle of Barnabas:

That is why we celebrate with joy the day on which, after showing himself, he ascended into heaven.³

But Christians had to belie their saviour and take him to Hades to fulfill other prophecies. They, therefore, postponed his resurrection and ascension to a future date.

The ascension of Jesus is recorded in three different passages in the New Testament. Matthew and John are absolutely silent. If the ascension had occurred, would they have omitted to mention this most wonderful miracle of all?

The first reference appears in a verse in Mark:

So then, after the Lord had spoken unto them, he was received up into heaven and sat on the right hand of God.⁴

Luke says:

And he led them as far as to Bethany, and he lifted up his hands and blessed them. And it came to pass, while he blessed them, he was parted from them and carried up into heaven.⁵

To complete the story, I will also mention the only other passage in the New Testament which speaks of the ascension:

And when he had spoken these things, while they beheld, he was taken up; and a cloud removed him out of their sight.⁶

The passage in Mark is a forgery. All the most important manuscripts — the *Codex Vaticanus*, the Greek *Codex Sinaiticus* and the *Sinaitic Syriac* do not contain this verse. In the fourth century Eusebius said that “in the accurate manuscripts Mark ended with verse 8 of Chapter 16. Saint Jerome also confirmed this and the Greek Fathers of the same period, Athanasius, the two Cyrils, Basil and Gregory Nazianzen, do not even mention this passage. Neither did Tertullian, nor Cyprian, rely on this

1. Luke, 23 : 43.

2. Gospel of Peter, Ch. 5.

3. The Epistle of Barnabas, 15 : 9.

4. Mark, 16 : 19.

5. Luke, 24 : 50-51.

6. Acts, 1 : 9.

verse. I may mention that the Armenian text of 986 C.E. attributes this verse to Ariston, the Presbyter of the second century. This verse of Mark has not only been rejected by Westcott and Hort but by all other scholars, irrespective of their school of thought. The verse itself contains inherent evidence which clearly indicates that it is not the product of an eye-witness. Mark, as I have already mentioned, was not one of the disciples of Jesus. He wrote on hearsay. The verse really portrays an imaginary version and the belief of the author or the redactor; for no one could say of his personal knowledge or observation that Jesus “sat on the right hand of God.”

It is a curious fact that, like the passage in Mark, the verses of Luke are also forgeries. Dummelow admits that “the ancient authorities omit these words,” and adds that if the words “and carried up into heaven” are omitted, it is possible to regard this event, not as an ascension, but as a disappearance of Jesus at the end of the interview.¹ Peake in his *Commentary on the Bible* says:

The words “and was carried up into heaven” are omitted in some of the best MSS., and have probably crept in from Acts, 1 : 9.²

The interpolation in this instance is very clumsy. It is exposed by the context itself. I will reproduce the three verses of Ch. 26 with the interpolated words in italics:

50. And he led them out as far as to Bethany, and he lifted up his hands, and blessed them.

51. And it came to pass, while he blessed them, he was parted from them, *and was carried up into heaven.*

52. And they *worshipped him*, and returned to Jerusalem with *great joy*.

The words *worshipped him* and *with great joy* are also the result of forgeries.³ It is obvious that the intervening verse only serves to put the other two verses out of joint. It is amusing to note that the disciples *worshipped him* when he was supposed to have vanished and had been *carried up into heaven*. Verses 50-52 without the interpolations, make a natural reading:

And he led them out as far as Bethany, and he lifted up his hands and blessed them. And it came to pass, while he blessed, he was parted from them. And they returned to Jerusalem.

Mark and Luke, therefore, do not mention this unique event. Matthew and John are absolutely silent. The Prayer Book of the Church of England says:

Whatever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man, that it should be believed.

Why in the name of the Lord then, does the Church preach the Ascension of Jesus,

1. Dummelow, *Commentary on the Holy Bible*, 769.

2. Peake, *Commentary on the Bible*, 742.

3. Revised Version, p. 1167; See also Dummelow, *Commentary on the Holy Bible*, 769.

and why do the Christians of Jerusalem strain their eyes daily to watch Jesus come down to earth from heaven?

I have already given detailed reasons why the authority of the Acts as a whole has never been admitted and have referred to Codex Bezae and the other "Western Manuscripts" to show that the various manuscripts differ. The compilers of the *Encyclopaedia Biblica* after commenting on this aspect of the Acts say:

The results then with reference to the trustworthiness of the Acts, as far as its facts are concerned, are these:

No statement merits immediate acceptance on the ground of its presence in the book. . . positive proof of the trustworthiness of the Acts must be tested with the greatest care.¹

Thus, the two references in the Gospels are forgeries and, being of a spurious nature, are, therefore, unworthy of reliance. Again, the ascension in clouds presupposes a heaven towards the sky. Is there any justification for this supposition? If not, is Jesus to be represented as theoretically giving an illusion for the satisfaction of his disciples? The words: he was parted from them, in Luke, only convey that Jesus was taking leave of them, and removing himself further from them, and on the Mount of Transfiguration a cloud had interposed itself between Jesus and them, and, with the numerous olive trees on the Mount, he was concealed from their sight, a result which on the assurance of the two unknown men *in white* the disciples regarded as a reception of Jesus into heaven.

The reference of Mark to Jesus sitting on the right hand of God is again a repetition of the Psalms.² The imagination of primitive Christians must, however, have felt a strong temptation to depict this exaltation as a brilliant spectacle. When once it was realized that Jesus as Messiah must have arrived at such an exalted position, it must have appeared desirable that someone should gaze after him, as it were, on his way to heaven. The future return of Daniel had to be a visible descent on clouds.³ This itself suggested that Jesus' departure to heaven should also be represented as a visible ascent on a cloud. Therefore, Luke only makes an assertion in the Acts to this effect.⁴ He also discloses a nervous desire to provide "witnesses."

The ascension of Jesus is rendered unbelievable not only by the fact that the two evangelists, first and fourth, make no mention of it at all, but also for want of agreement between the two who do mention it. Mark is at variance with Luke and Luke is at variance with himself. From the narrative of Mark it is obvious that Jesus ascended on the day of his resurrection, immediately after the meal at which he appeared to the disciples in a house in Jerusalem. Now, since ascension through a roof might have presented certain difficulties, Mark described it as having taken place in the open air

1. *Ency. Biblica*, Col. 46.

2. Ps., 110 : 1.

3. Dan., 7 : 13.

4. Acts, 1 : 9.

at the Mount of Olives near Bethany. Luke also conveys that the ascension took place on the day of the resurrection, but in the Acts he definitely asserts that it was forty days after.¹ Paul, however, describes another visit of Jesus to this world after the forty days, for Jesus appeared to him long after at Damascus. The appearance of Jesus to his brother James is sandwiched in during the interval. Thus Jesus must have been making upward and downward journeys between heaven and earth.

But, in spite of the discrepancies and divergences already mentioned, can anyone believe that a palpable body which still has flesh and bones and eats material earthly food² be qualified for a celestial abode? Jesus himself, referring to married life, said that life in heaven would not be earthly.³ It is a peculiar coincidence that during his life, before the resurrection, Jesus was blamed for eating and drinking, and he continued to do so even after his supposed resurrection.

How can an earthly body so far liberate itself from the laws of gravity as to be capable of an ascent through air? Nowhere are we told that the grosser elements which the body of Jesus still retained after the resurrection had been removed before his ascent. Besides, the disciples, who were present at the time of the ascension did not observe any residuum of his body which he had left behind.

But what became of Jesus? Before I answer this question I must give some details of the secret Order known as the Essenes (meaning the *Pious*) which existed at the time of Jesus and to which Jesus and John the Baptist belonged.⁴ Jesus had been "admitted into the Order at the same time with John in their years of early manhood."⁵

Josephus described the Essenes Order as a secret brotherhood which was opposed to the Pharisees and Sadducees. They are nowhere mentioned in the Bible, but Philo of Alexandria, who was the first to assert that Jesus had been claimed by the members of this brotherhood, gave their number as about 4,000. Irenaeus and Epiphanius mentioned this sect as forming an integral part of the Ebionites. We are told that they disappeared in the second century: no doubt having been dissolved by Christianity. Lightfoot, however, refers to them as having been absorbed by the Sampsanians.

What most struck the outside observer was the strictness and secrecy of their Order. They usually held their meetings in uninhabited places, where they built their monasteries of "White Houses." In villages and towns they settled round a central house of their Order. In these monasteries or central houses they followed their observances together. A three years' novitiate was necessary before admission to the Order; the entrant was pledged by oaths of the most solemn kind to obedience and reticence; to hate the wicked and to side with the just. While describing the Essenes, the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* says:

They wore simple *white garments* and did not own a change of clothes. Their con-

1. Acts, 1 : 3.

2. Matt., 11 : 19.

3. Matt., 22 : 29-30.

4. Renan, *Life of Jesus*, 34. See also Julicher, *Hat Jesus Gelebt*, 48.

5. *Crucifixion*, by an Eye-Witness, 35.

duct was orderly and their conversation restrained....cases of disobedience were almost unknown, neither bribe nor torture could make them false to their sect.¹

Josephus tells us that the Essenes, because of their *long white garments*, resorted to countless washings, and avoidance of impurities prevented the members of the brotherhood from coming into contact even with a novice. The Encyclopaedia Biblica says that:

They had investigated, to good purpose, in the interests of medicine, the healing virtues of roots and stones.²

In short, the Essenes were members of a strict secret Order, who would not contact non-members; who hated the wicked; who knew the healing virtues of herbs and minerals; who were distinguished by their *long white garments* and who had their monastic lodges in uninhabited places and central houses in villages and towns. To this Order did Jesus belong, and was, perhaps, one of its leaders.

I must also mention a peculiar feature in the life of Jesus. It was his habit to withdraw himself, at different times, for prayers to the mountains. He did this both in Galilee and near Jerusalem.³ and we find that everything which was a little out of the ordinary was done on a mountain.⁴ We are told that Jesus used to withdraw in secret alone to these mountains,⁵ and if necessary his disciples used to visit him “privately” at these places.⁶ When Jesus was afraid for his life he took shelter in an unknown place.⁷ He used suddenly to disappear and reappear.⁸ At the most crucial moment of his life he went to the Mount of Olives,⁹ (the place is described also as Gethsemane).¹⁰ And his ascension was likewise alleged to be from a mountain.¹¹ Matthew speaks of his last appearance to the disciples in the mountains of Galilee.¹²

It is a peculiar fact that after his alleged resurrection Jesus always greeted people by saying: “Peace be unto you”¹³ a sign of recognition peculiar to the Essenes.¹⁴

Edersheim mentions a “white house” of the Essenes on the top of the Mount of Olives, the edge of which is regarded as the point of ascension.¹⁵ Christians now have a sanctuary there, and near this place the very footprints, sometimes of the right foot and sometimes of the left, of Jesus, on the rock are pointed out to pilgrims.

Joseph of Arimathea, who was unknown to the disciples and was described by John as a *secret* disciple of Jesus, belonged to the Essenes Order.¹⁶ Nicodemus, another

1. *Ency. Brit.*, 14th Edn. Art. *Essenes* (Italics are mine.)

2. *Ency. Biblica*, Col. 1938.

3. Matt., 14 : 23-24; 15 : 29; 17 : 1; 21 : 17; Mark, 13 : 3. Luke, 21 : 37; John, 8 : 1.

4. Luke, 6 : 12. John, 6 : 3.

5. John, 6 : 15.

6. Mark, 13 : 1-3.

7. John, 10 : 39-40.

8. John, 15 : 25.

9. Luke, 22 : 39.

10. Matt., 26 : 36; Mark, 14 : 26, 32.

11. Acts, 1 : 9, 12.

12. Matt., 28 : 16.

13. Luke, 24 : 36; John, 20 : 19, 21, 26.

14. *The Crucifixion*, by an Eye- Witness 22.

15. Edersheim. *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, 1 : 148.

16. *Jewish Ency.* Vol. 8 : 250. See John, 19 : 38.

member of the Order, used to come to Jesus *secretly* by night.¹ We are told that Mary Magdalene on looking into the Sepulchre found two angels in *white* sitting in it² and Peter found the linen clothes neatly wrapped together in the sepulchre.³ Luke also mentions two men in *shining garments* at the Sepulchre.⁴ Mark speaks of a young man in a *long white garment*,⁵ who was hiding inside the tomb, no doubt to avoid detection. One of Jesus' followers, whom the Gospels could not identify, also wore a *long white robe*.⁶ In the Acts we are told that two men in *white apparel* appeared to the disciples just at the time Jesus was "taken up."⁷ And, lastly, Jesus himself appeared to his disciples in the mountains of Galilee in "raimants. . . shining exceedingly white like snow," and warned Peter to keep it a secret.⁸

It need hardly be mentioned that *white* garments do shine in the dark.

It is, perhaps, now a simple matter to answer the question:

Who were these angels or men in *white robes*? To Christians these men in *white garments* have always remained a mystery and they, therefore, described them as *angels*. The Holy Qur-'an styles these *helpers* of Jesus as *hawariyyoon*.⁹ This cannot be a reference to the so-called disciples of Jesus who were always "wondering" and "doubting" and were running away from Jesus whenever he was in adversity. The word *hawariyyoon* is a plural of *hawari*, which is from the root *hoor* (meaning: *simple whiteness*). The word *hawari*, therefore, means "one who whitens his clothes or garments by washing and beating them."¹⁰ Lane opines that for this reason the word *hawariyyoon* is applied to the companions (not the disciples) of Jesus.¹¹ The Holy Qur-'an is very exact in its terminology and it described the *helpers* of Jesus by their distinctive dress—white garments.

I will quote the words of Celsus in this connection:

The angels referred to by the Gospels in connection with the Resurrection (*and may I add Ascension*) were colleagues of Jesus, who were unknown to the disciples of Jesus, and must have been two members of the Essenes Order who according to the peculiar features of this sect wore white robes.¹²

Paulus refers to the two men in *white apparel* as the secret colleagues of Jesus. Edersheim in his *Life and Times of Jesus, the Messiah*, while referring to a white house "on the top of this very hill which belonged to the Essenes," says that "while engulfed in the clouds, Jesus went into this house." Balvidt also says that Jesus went to an Essenes lodge, which exists till to-day on the top of the Mount of Olives, and he

1. John, 3 : 1-2.

2. John, 20 : 12.

3. John, 20 : 7.

4. Luke, 24 : 4.

5. Mark: 16 : 5.

6. Acts, 1 : 10.

7. *Ibid.*

8. Mark, 9 : 3; Matt., 17 : 1-2; Luke, 9 : 20.

9. The Holy Qur-'an, 3 : 52.

10. Lane, E. G., *The Arabic-English Lexicon, Book 2* : 666.

11. *Ibid.*

12. Orig: C. Cels., C. 53.

rested there. Brenecke asserts further that thereafter Jesus long continued to work for the welfare of Jews in far-off lands.

In view of these facts, it is not difficult to reconstruct the scenes of the resurrection and that of the ascension.

Joseph of Arimathea, a member of the Essenes Order, owned a private garden, in a rock in which he had an unused tomb made for himself. Under direction of this Order, he asked Pilate for the body of Jesus. He took it down, and Nicodemus, another member of the same Order, brought a hundred pound weight of *myrrh and aloes* powder; and some other medicine. The members of this Order, Nicodemus particularly, knew the use of medicine. The *Marham-i-Isa*, the Ointment of Jesus, to which a reference has already been made, was prepared and applied to the wounds of Jesus on this occasion. The linen was wound round and round the wounds, after these medicines had been applied.¹ They placed the body in the tomb. They were careful to leave his neck and face uncovered. They did not fill up the tomb with earth, but placed a stone on it. Let me not presume that they visited the sepulchre during the first night, but knowledge must be attributed to them that they should permit nature to come to their rescue and cure Jesus. They smoked the tomb with aloes² and other strengthening herbs. The chill of the stone floor and walls of the tomb, to some extent, revived and awakened Jesus. Let me further not presume that they did anything to the body of Jesus during the following day. During the Saturday night Jesus regained consciousness and, before sunrise, they carried him away to a house in the garden and later took him to the central house of their Order in Jerusalem.

Thirty hours had not passed since the assumed death of Jesus when the brother heard a slight noise within the grotto..... and he heard with inexpressible joy that the legs of the body moved and that it breathed. He at once hastened to Jesus to assist him, and heard slight sounds rising from his breast. The face assumed a living appearance and the eyes opened and in astonishment gazed at the novice of our Order.³

After narrating that on information of the recovery of Jesus being conveyed, Joseph of Arimathea, Nicodemus and twenty-four other members of the Order went to the tomb, the Eye-Witness states:

But Jesus was not yet strong enough to walk; therefore he was carried to the house belonging to our Order that was close to the Calvary.⁴

At about this juncture Mary Magdalene with the other women came to the sepulchre, i.e., on Sunday morning when it was "yet dark," and not only saw the stone rolled away, but also saw Jesus being carried away by them. Without looking into the sepulchre, she at once ran back to Peter and bewailed:

1. *Crucifixion*, by an Eye-Witness, 75.

2. *Ibid.*

3. *Ibid.*, 79.

4. *Ibid.*, 87.

They have taken away the Lord out of the Sepulchre and *we* know not where they have laid him.¹

I have already explained fully why Jesus had of necessity to appear after intervals to his disciples and why, owing to the tenderness of his wounds, he did not allow Mary Magdalene to touch him, though subsequently he himself invited Thomas to do so.

The ascension is a simpler matter still. Jesus was going up the mountain when he is said to have *parted* from his disciples. Heavy clouds, as often happens in mountainous country, came low and their mist gradually engulfed him. The olive trees on the Mount also screened him. By the time the clouds had lifted he had reached the summit and had entered the “white house” or, in other words, had crossed the ridge.² On the assurance of the two secret colleagues *in white*, who became visible after the lifting of the mist, the wondering disciples regarded this event as the reception of Jesus into heaven.

Lo and behold! the two miracles, the Resurrection and the Ascension, on which is founded the entire Christian faith, disappear. The stupendous Christological superstructure, so laboriously built, falls into a heap of rubbish.

1. John, 20 : 2.

2. *Crucifixion*, by an Eye-Witness, 124.



Above: plaster cast of the 'footprint' relief of the Prophet Yuz Asaf/Jesus. One can clearly see what the sculptor was trying to stress: the marks of the crucifixion are represented as crescents below the toes.

Below: in this building 'Rozabal' (= tomb of the prophet) the burial place of Yuz Asaf (= Jesus) is found in the centre of the old town of Srinagar.



(See Chapter 25)

CHAPTER 14

EXALTATION OF JESUS

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

2. The Quran, 3 : 52-55.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

1. The Quran, 5 : 116-117.

2. *Ibid.*, 32 : 11.

3. *Ibid.*, 4 : 97.

4. *Ibid.*, 8 : 50.

5. *Ibid.*, 6 : 61.

6. *Ibid.*, 22 : 5.

7. *Ibid.*, 4 : 15.

8. *Ibid.*, 12 : 101.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

1. The Quran, 24 : 36
 2. *Ibid.*, 6 : 84; 12 : 76.
 3. *Ibid.*, 94 : 4.

4. *Ibid.*, 19 : 57
 5. *Ibid.*, 58 : 11

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

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

To sum up:

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

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

Mahmud Shaltut

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

1. The Quran, 8 : 30.



The Good Shepherd (Palestine).



The Good Shepherd (Kashmir). (See page 309)



The Author's daughter is standing at the head of a Jewish grave (East-West) with another at extreme left. The graves of Muslims are at right angles (North-South) in Srinagar. (See page 325.)



Another view of three Jewish graves adjoining Ziarat-i-Balad-i-Rumi, Srinagar. (See page 325.)