

Extracts from Imam Shaltut's Fatwa

"These are the verses of the Holy Qur'an which relate all that Jesus experienced at the hands of his people. The last verse relates an incident in the Hereafter when Allah will ask Jesus concerning him and his mother being worshipped in the world and Jesus will reply that he did not say anything to his followers except that which God had commanded him, that is, worship Allah who is your God and my God, and he kept watch over them during the period of his stay among them and that he did not know what they did after Allah caused him to die.

"The word, tawaffa, has been used in the Holy Qur'an in the sense of death so many times that it has become its foremost meaning. This word is used in its different sense only when there is a clear indication as to the other meaning."

"The word tawaffaaytani 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 death of Jesus in this verse, even then it would have been improper and incorrect to state that the Messiah Jesus was alive and not dead.

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

"However, in Surah Al Nisa, the passage, 'Nay, Allah exalted him in His presence' has been interpreted by some, nay most commentators, as raising him up to heaven. They observe that Allah cast his likeness on somebody else and Jesus himself was lifted up to heaven with his body and he is alive there and will descend from there in latter days. Thereafter, he will annihilate the swine and break the cross. They argue this on the basis of the story:

"Firstly on the report in which the descent of Jesus is mentioned after the appearance of the Dajaal [Anti-Christ]. "But these reports are at variance with and contradictory to one another in their word and meaning. The difference is so great that there is no room for any reconciliation among them. The scholars of Hadith have plainly stated this fact. Moreover, they are reported by Wahab bin Munnabba and Ba'ab Akbar, who were converts from the people of the Book [Jews or Christians]. And their status is well known to the critics of Traditions.

"Secondly, on the report of Abu Huraira that mentions the descent of Jesus. If this report is proved to be true, even then it would be an isolated report. And there is a consensus of opinion of the

scholars of Hadith that such isolated reports can neither be made the basis of doctrinal beliefs nor can they be trusted with regard to things unseen.

"Thirdly, on the report about the Miraj which narrates that when the Prophet went up and began to have the gates of heaven 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 Traditions have taken this contact of the Prophet with other prophets to have a spiritual phenomenon and not a physical one."

"Strangely enough they interpret the word rafa in this verse in light of the report concerning the Miraj and deduce therefrom that Jesus was 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! Allah exalted him in His presence). thus when these people interpret the Hadith they quote this verse to support their imaginary meaning of the Hadith and while interpreting the verse they cite this Hadith 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 Surah Al-Nisa, 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 these 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 God caused Jesus to die and exalted him and sanctified him against the charges of his enemies. Allama Alusi has interpreted this verse 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, rafa 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 honor and exaltation."

"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.' And such an offense is committed on account of a belief in such stories and narratives which are devoid of accuracy, not to speak of established unauthenticity."

To sum up:

1. There is nothing in the Holy Qur'an, nor in the sacred Traditions of the Prophet which endorse the correctness of the belief to the contentment of the 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 Qur'anic verses about Jesus show that God had promised to cause him to die a natural death, then 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 the continuity of his physical existence in heaven and his descent in the latter ages, does not deny a fact that can be established by clear and conclusive arguments. Thus he is not outside the faith of Islam and it is absolutely wrong to consider him apostate. He is perfectly a Muslim. If he dies, his death is that of a believer and 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 condition of His servants.

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