

# A critique of the Orientalists' novel interpretations of the Qur'ānic narrative of Jesus' Crucifixion

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## Abstract

Eschatology in the Abrahamic religions have certain similarities, while simultaneously having deep creedal conflicts. One such key point of difference is Jesus the son of Mary's (pbut) final moments on this earth. This issue, being a core difference, has ever been a controversial topic among all Semitic faiths. The thrust on this issue remains comparatively higher than other differences due to certain events of the Eschaton being contingent on this incident, which leads to conflicting beliefs in all spheres of the three faiths. Christian and Muslim scholars have ever been active on the discussions pertaining to it, and some of the Christian scholars, if not most of them, have attempted to prove that the Qur'ānic perspective (or the Qur'an and the Hadīthic perspective together) of the Crucifixion in Islam isn't coherent with what the classical scholars of *Tafsir* have emphasized upon. Dr G. S. Reynolds is one such prominent scholar who authored a thorough research a decade ago attempting to prove the same. In this paper I try to explain the flaws of the novel interpretations and explain why there is no space for such excogitations. As I briefly discuss the *tafāsīr*, I also introduce an objective Hadith approach on the topic, showing that the conclusions drawn by the novel interpretations are the result of a partial study of an integrated topic. I have also attempted to show why the Gospel's narrative isn't the best account of the Crucifixion. The paper also aims to prove that neither the *Tafsīr*, nor the Hadīth put words into the Qur'ānic narrative, although both prove to be complementing and supplementing at times.

According to some historians and theologians, the Qur'ān came up with a completely extrinsic idea on this core article of Christianity, 6 centuries after it had happened. Wilhelm Rudolph for example, suggested that the Qur'ān's denial of the Crucifixion reflects instead Muhammad's particular idea that

Prophets are always vindicated,<sup>1</sup> which is quite inconsistent with the Qur'ānic narrative since the Qur'ān itself narrates tales of the Prophets being tried and persecuted to degree where they were even killed at the hand of their people. Surah Āl 'Imrān (3) 21 for instance, mentions this malice as {*As to those who deny the Signs of Allah and in defiance of right, slay the prophets, and slay those who teach just dealing with mankind, announce to them a grievous penalty*}. This also confirms some hadithic accounts, like that of the death of John, most authentic of them being the one on the authority of 'Urwa ibn al-Zubayr as "John the son of Zacharias wasn't killed but because of an immoral woman who said to her partner that I won't be pleased with you except if you bring me his head, so he went and brought his (decapitated) head in a basin".<sup>2</sup>

### **The death of Jesus: Qur'ānic narrative exclusively**

The Qur'ān primarily relates the issue in three verses, Surah an-Nisā' (4) 157-9 to be specific. The context is the same since verse 155, being: *Banu Israel's* notorious practice of breaking solemn covenants. Comments on the critical points of the narrative are as follows:

- i) The unusual sequence of 'killing and then crucifying' mentioned in the Qur'ān<sup>3</sup>

Surah an-Nisā' (4) 157 says {*they didn't kill him, nor did they crucify him*}, which might make one question the order of occurrence of the two incidents, as crucifixion is bound to occur before death and not after it if the subject is to be killed by crucifixion. While in reality, this structure is more rhetorical in disguise than the usual way of saying it. Though by simply putting it as "they didn't crucify him nor did they kill him", it would have become the factually correct order apparently; on a closer reflection however, leads to redundancy of words; those which do not benefit the listener in terms of knowledge, nor do add to an emphasis on the statement. Historically known, the Jews didn't use any other method after their attempt to kill Jesus by crucifixion. Therefore, adding "they didn't kill him" after denying the crucifixion would be a supernumerary mention of words. On the other hand, the actually mentioned order in the Qur'ān adds to emphasis by a great deal. By saying "they didn't kill

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<sup>1</sup> W Rudolph. "Die Abh? ngigkeit des Qorans von Judentum und Christentum" 82

<sup>2</sup> Ibn Abi Shaybah in his *Musannaf* from 'Urwa ibn al-Zubayr. at-Tabarī and Ibn Kathīr too have narrated such accounts

<sup>3</sup> Dr Reynolds points out this fact noticing Ibn Kathīr's repetition of the phrase in his exegesis, by saying "*wa ma qataluhu wa-ma salabuhu*, precisely the sequence of the Quran's phrase, despite the fact that death usually follows crucifixion, not vice versa." (*The Muslim Jesus: Dead or alive?* 244)

him, nor did they crucify him” the Qur’ān ridicules their claim, since that is to put it as “they didn’t kill him, nor did they even crucify him,<sup>4</sup> hence killing is far from what they claim”. By saying it the way the Qur’ān has said, it highlights the delusions of competence they had about themselves and how ‘Allah outsmarted them’, as Kenneth Cragg sees it.<sup>5</sup> Evidently, this emphasis is a rebuttal on their superbia and haughtiness expressed as “Indeed we killed Jesus Christ, the son of Mary – Messenger of Allāh”.<sup>6</sup>

ii) The use of the word *šubbiha*

In verse 157, the Qur’ān uses the word ‘*šubbiha*’ (passive form of ‘resemble/look like’,<sup>7</sup> i.e.: “made to seem like”). So while mentioning the transgressions of *Banu Israel*, the Qur’ān sheds light on the saying of *Banu Israel* regarding their belief of what end Jesus met, which is: that they killed him by crucifixion; Christian be it or be it a Jew, all had the unanimous consensus on the apparent Crucifixion of Jesus Christ. The Qur’ān however, bought up a completely new theory about the crucifixion, revealing the incident to be a mere look-like of Jesus’ crucifixion. In the verse at hand, it is contingent on the word ‘*šubbiha*’. Linguistically speaking, it ascertains the certain point that what the People of the Book believed, was merely “made to look like so to them” (*šubbiha lahum*); while simultaneously leaving room for what precisely it was “made to look”. In the Islamic tradition, this verse is one of those verses which were revealed to convey the right creed for the believers to come, and to remind with the lesson of those who renegaded against Allah’s orders. The Qur’ān confirms to it in Surah an-Naḥl (16) 64, {*And We sent down the Book to thee for the express purpose, that thou shouldst make clear to them those things*

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<sup>4</sup> In the punishment of crucifixion, the subject can possibly die but can still be saved; i.e.: mere crucifixion isn’t a certain death for the crucified. Matthew W. Maslen and Piers D Mitchell in the paper ‘*Medical theories on the cause of death in crucifixion*’ have stated a non-exhaustive but ten most popular ‘medical hypotheses for the cause of death of Jesus, or crucifixion in general’, with not one of them being an instantaneous death merely by fixing the subject on the crucifix. (Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine, volume 99, April 2006, page 186). Rather, we have an evidence that a certain crucified person didn’t die at all. (Lloyd-Davies M, Lloyd-Davies TA. *Resurrection or resuscitation?* J Roy Coll Phys Lond 1991; 25:167–70)

<sup>5</sup> “Thus, the phrase *shubbiha la-hum* does not mean that the figure of Jesus appeared to them, but rather that the event was made to appear other than it was; in other words, God outsmarted them (cf. Q 3.54).” K. Cragg, *Jesus and the Muslim* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1985), 168. Although I don’t endorse the entire statement of Dr Cragg, but I do assert that the sequence in which ‘killed and crucified’ is said, is indicative of outsmarting the other party in this context, as explained earlier.

<sup>6</sup> Surah an-Nisā’ (4) 157. Although there is a difference of opinion on the part “Messenger of Allah” whether it is from the saying of the Jews, or has Allāh added to Jesus’ description. See *Tafsir al-Māwardi* (1/543)

<sup>7</sup> Hans Wehr, *A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic* (page 454, third edition, edited by J Milton Covan, Spoken Language Services, Inc)

*in which they differ, and that it should be a guide and a mercy to those who believe.}*

The phrase is linguistically ambiguous for someone in quest of what exactly happened at the time of the crucifixion. Although exegetes have relayed narrations from the earliest of generations, but the answer to the exact “how” of the event isn’t available from either of the two authoritative sources. The Qur’ān puts it out simply as in Surah an-Nisā (4) 157-9 without going into the details, and perhaps the reason why its details aren’t mentioned is the absence of any necessity driving it; just like the knowledge of how exactly Abraham survived inside the pit of fire, or how the she-camel of Saleh came out of a mountain, so is the knowledge of the process of Crucifixion in the Islamic thought.

iii) The prevalent translations of the phrase ‘*šubbiha lahum*’

A couple of the prevalent translations of the phrase ‘*šubbiha lahum*’ may differ from the mainstream ones, depending upon the methodology of the translator. Whatever differences in the translations are apparent, are merely a choice of words available for the word ‘*šubbiha*’ from among the pool of acceptable meanings, all of which eventually converge closely towards “it was made to seem/appear/resemble so to them” (that is to say: there was something that actually happened, and there was another which they eventually believed). In my opinion, the translators are divided into the following three groups:

- The first one – being the professional linguists – translate the phrase strictly according to only what the language allows. This group includes almost all the translators, some of the most popular ones being: Abdullah Yusuf Ali,<sup>8</sup> Mohammad Marmaduke William Pickthall,<sup>9</sup> Corpus,<sup>10</sup> Talal Itani,<sup>11</sup> Abdel Haleem,<sup>12</sup> Fakhry.<sup>13</sup> Arberry<sup>14</sup> too is arguably included in this group, as his is only the preference of the word ‘likeness’ over ‘appear’ in this context, otherwise his translation has no insinuation of any of the exegetic opinions.

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<sup>8</sup> “but so it was made to appear to them”

<sup>9</sup> “but it appeared so unto them”

<sup>10</sup> “but it was made to appear (so) to them”

<sup>11</sup> “but it appeared to them as if they did.”

<sup>12</sup> “though it was made to appear like that to them”

<sup>13</sup> “but so it was made to appear unto them”

<sup>14</sup> “only a likeness of that was shown to them”

- The second group are those who mixed their bit of preferred exegetic essence, consequently their translations include words, arguably being outside the permissible limit of the phrase *per se*. This group includes some of the translators Dr Reynolds mentioned: Paret.<sup>15</sup> Blachère's<sup>16</sup> translation is also counted under this category because he regards the pronoun of 'šubbiha' to be referring to Jesus, while the most linguistically apparent and thereby prevalent opinion has it referring to the incident of the Crucifixion, rather than Jesus himself.
- The third group is the one which though have utilized the linguistic method of translation, but have conveyed their preferred interpretation in footnotes; perhaps this group is a subgroup of the first group. In my knowledge, this group includes Mustafa Khattab.

When it comes to critical reading however, objective works are prioritized by the academic thought since the subjective ones trace their contingency back to a human or a group and their personal preferences. The objective translations seem to be two in my opinion:

- The translations with pure linguistic approach, verifiable from earlier works,
- The translations including essence of an unanimously agreed upon exegesis; that is to say: absence of differing opinions.

It is evident that the latter isn't the possible case for this verse, as the exegetes have differed on the process of the incident. Mere differing choice of words among the translators mustn't be seen as "ambiguity and difference among the scholars" as long as the exegetic interpretation shows congruency, because if that would be the case then there would be no unambiguous multi-translated document on the face of the Earth.

iv) The Qur'ān accepts the death of Jesus?<sup>17</sup>

Christian scholars have contended to the fact that the Qur'ān accepts the death of Jesus, one of the verses being quoted is Surah Maryam (19) 33. In Surah Maryam (19) 30-33, the Qur'ān narrates the speech of a new born Jesus defending his mother from the great calumny, by speaking miraculously from the cradle. It goes as {*He spake: Lo! I am the slave of*

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<sup>15</sup> "Vielmehr erschien ihnen (ein anderer) ähnlich (so daß sie ihn mit Jesus verwechselten und töteten)" (= "Rather, (someone else) appeared like them (so that they mistook him for Jesus and killed him)")

<sup>16</sup> "Mais que son sosie a été substitué à leur yeux" (= "But that his double was substituted in their eyes")

<sup>17</sup> Dr Reynolds' original contention

*Allah. He hath given me the Scripture and hath appointed me a Prophet (v30), And hath made me blessed wheresoever I may be, and hath enjoined upon me prayer and almsgiving so long as I remain alive (v31), And (hath made me) dutiful toward her who bore me, and hath not made me arrogant, unblest (v32). Peace on me the day I was born, and the day I die, and the day I shall be raised alive! (v33)}*

Dr Reynolds uses this verse to imply that this is an evidence of Jesus' humanly death,<sup>18</sup> which actually isn't any point of difference between the Christians and the Muslims, as Muslims too believe that he will die a humanly death; the difference lies in the point that Muslims believe that this humanly death will occur only after the Eschaton. Needless to say, it is clear that Jesus is referring to his death in the Eschaton because the same pattern of prayer has passed 15 verses ago where Zachariah is praying for his son John by saying "*Peace on him the day he was born, and the day he dieth and the day he shall be raised alive! (v15)*", and we know with certainty that John wasn't crucified, thereby not 'raised alive' later. As for the criticism on the absence of explicit futurity,<sup>19</sup> evidently enough, it seems a natural to say "peace on me the day I will die" than saying "peace on me after a millennium when I will die". Moreover, the phrase "the day I am raised alive" is a common phrase in Islamic sources always referring to the Day of Resurrection,<sup>20</sup> as it is the only 'raising alive' one undergoes.

v) "*The Qur'ān only denies the death of Jesus at the hand of the Jews, and not the denial of his death in general*"<sup>21</sup>

In verse 157 itself, the Qur'ān says that 'they didn't kill him, nor did they crucify him', with the pronoun 'they' referring to the 'People of the Scripture' passed in verse 153. In the very next verse however, the Qur'ān says {***Rather Allāh took him up unto Himself. Allāh was ever Mighty, Wise***}. This is a clear negation of all sorts of death, whether it be at the hands of the Jewish Pharisees or the Romans, because the Qur'ān didn't leave the statement open for further inferences or interpolations, rather it concludes the matter by saying that '*they*

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<sup>18</sup> "Muslim Jesus: Dead or alive?" 239

<sup>19</sup> Geoffrey Parrinder, *Jesus in the Qur'ān* (London: Faber and Faber, 1965)

<sup>20</sup> As Satan asked for respite until the day of Resurrection by using the same phrase {He said: "Give me respite till *the day they are raised up.*"} Surah al A'rāf (7) 14

<sup>21</sup> William Montgomery Watt proposes an idea branching from the same understanding, being: that even a Christian might accept the Quran's statement on the crucifixion, "since the crucifixion was the work of Roman soldiers; and it is also true in a deeper sense, since the crucifixion was not a victory for the Jews in view of his resurrection" W. M. Watt, *Muslim-Christian Encounters*, 22.

*didn't kill him nor did they crucify him, rather Allah raised him to Himself*. It is a conclusive statement on the question of what Islam says in regard to the incident of the Crucifixion.

By saying that the Qur'ān turns the compass from the Jews, only to correct this misunderstanding by replacing Romans (apparently a well-known fact to all), is either indicative of academic dishonesty with a text well-established in its context, or a naïve understanding of linguistics and semantics. The plot would be ridiculous if considered the way it is being insinuated, because it would go as: *“(the Jews) didn't kill him nor did they crucify him (but the Romans were the ones who crucified him at the demand of the Jews); rather Allah raised him to Himself”*. As apparent as this statement's invalidity is, it is also an invalid rendition because of the following facts:

- The Romans and the Jews weren't two independent entities when it comes to the traditional narrative of Jesus' crucifixion, they were united against him.<sup>22</sup>
- Such a narrative doesn't hold good linguistically. Based on the language used (*“rather Allah raised him to Himself”*) and the context it has been said, it is impossible to infer that only the killing at the hand of the Jews is denied, and directed to someone other than them. Rather it is evident that the death of Jesus in itself is being denied,<sup>23</sup> regardless of who's whom.
- This narrative is factually inconsistent, as there is no gap between the denial of death at their hand and his ascension to the heavens,<sup>24</sup> thereby

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<sup>22</sup> See Gospel of Matthew [27: 26], Mark [15: 15], Luke [23: 25], John [19: 16], where Pilate is finally delivering Jesus to them for crucifixion, thereby proving that the Romans and the Jews were but one entity on Jesus' passion. For instance, Mark [15: 15] says {*And so Pilate, willing to content the people, released Barabbas unto them, and delivered Jesus, when he had scourged him, to be crucified.*} (KJV)

<sup>23</sup> Surah an-Nisā' (4) 159 explicitly implies that Jesus is still alive by saying {*There is not one of the People of the Scripture but will believe in him before his death...*} (Pickthall, *The Meaning of the Glorious Quran*). Both the pronouns refer to Jesus as he is the only center of the discourse from verse 157 onwards. And if the second pronoun is assumed to be of the person from the People of the Scripture, it renders the meaning inconsistent as millions of them have died since 33AD without believing in him in the Islamic sense. This leaves us with two options: Either it is at the time of his descension to earth before the eschaton, so at that time there will remain none from the People of the Scripture except that he will believe in Jesus before Jesus' death. Or, that it is the time of eschaton and none of the People of the Scripture will die except that he will believe in Jesus before his own death. Regardless of which opinion outweighs the other, both the opinions have a pivotal point which suffices us here; that being: that Jesus will be alive on the earth, among the people, before the eschaton. Hence, Jesus' death being post millennial is evident from the Qur'ān itself.

<sup>24</sup> Following are the three verses, Surah an-Nisā' (4) 157-9 {**And [for] their saying, "Indeed, we have killed the Messiah, Jesus, the son of Mary, the Messenger of Allah." And they did not kill him, nor did they crucify him; but [another] was made to resemble him to them. And indeed, those who differ over it are in doubt about it. They have no knowledge of it except the following of assumption. And they did not kill him, for certain} – {Rather, Allah raised him to Himself. And ever is Allah Exalted in Might and Wise.} – {And there is none from**

leaving no room whatsoever, for someone to assert that the Qur’ān is only denying it from the Jews and that the room is still available for the Romans to occupy.

If pondered, the denial of his death in Surah an-Nisā’ (4) 157 doesn’t merely come for the sake of denial, but for the affirmation of the opposite in the next verse, verse 158 continues by saying: *{But Allah took him up unto Himself...}*. This, followed by an even more substantial affirmation in the next verse, Surah an-Nisā’ (4) 159, *{And there is none of the People of the Book but must believe in him before his death}*. The message in these three verses put together can be summarized as: “Not only is he alive and raised, he will be on earth before the eschaton and each one of the People of the Scripture will believe in him before his death; and on the day of Judgement, he will be a witness against those who received his message but falsified blatantly”. Neal Robinson expresses his criticism on the same by saying, “The attempt of some Christian apologists to circumvent the qur’anic denial of the crucifixion is disingenuous in the extreme. If the intention of 4.157–9 had been to indicate that it was God or the Romans and not the Jews who crucified Jesus this would surely have been stated explicitly.”<sup>25</sup>

### **The classical exegeses on the death of Jesus**

The classical exegeses report differing opinions on superfluous details, keeping intact the unanimity on the core articles. From the reasons of revelation of certain verses is the correction of the prevalent heresies. The Qur’ān has emphasized a great deal against the concept of ‘intermediaries in worship’,<sup>26</sup> which was rife in Mecca until the early 7<sup>th</sup> century. Coming to Christianity, the belief that Jesus got crucified for the sins of mankind, was somehow an analogous of the ‘intermediary’ belief of the polytheists of Mecca. The Qur’ān clarifies this misconception but with some aspects – not being a must-know – open for multiple interpretations. These interpretations are based on various parameters, varying from exegete to exegete. The factors include grade of authenticity of a certain hadithic report, depth of understanding of the Arabic

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**the People of the Scripture but that he will surely believe in Jesus before his death. And on the Day of Resurrection he will be against them a witness.}** (Sahih International)

<sup>25</sup> N. Robinson, *Christ in Islam and Christianity*, 115.

<sup>26</sup> The pagans of Mecca would worship certain allegedly pious predecessors, believing that they convey their worship and invocations to Allāh; which according to Islam - is polytheism. Hence the Qur’ān has greatly emphasized at numerous places on shunning polytheism by all means, and practicing monotheism and attaining its correct understanding.



language,<sup>27</sup> holistic comprehension, and other such academic parameters. Scholars are able to judge the most authentic opinions from among them, based on certain methods like authenticity of the chains of narrations of an opinion, degree of relevance of certain interpretations, etc.

Talking of this specific issue, the sixth century exegete, Ibn ‘Atiya al-Andalusi (d. 546 AH) records a consensus among the classical exegetes on the following points:<sup>28</sup>

- That Jesus is in the heavens, alive
- That he will descend in the end times, and kill the pigs, and break the cross, and kill the Antichrist, and establish justice, and will upraise the *Ummah* of Prophet Muhammad,
- That he will perform ‘*Umrah* and *Hajj*,
- That he will remain on this earth for 24 or 40 years
- Then Allah will make him die.

i) *Tafsir* denying the Crucifixion, and not the Qur’ān? <sup>29</sup>

The Qur’ān, in my opinion, is the most explicit source on the denial of the Crucifixion, that is why it is very unusual to come across the claim that the Qur’ān doesn’t deny the Crucifixion. Had it been that the Qur’ān would have ended the discourse at Surah an-Nisā’ (4) 157, then there could have been a room for the opinion that the Jews didn’t crucify him, but the Romans certainly did. As unusual it would have been in this context, it still would have been a haven for theorists and exegetes to warm the discourse. Unlike this, we know that the Qur’ān doesn’t stop there, rather it answers us with the alternate incident to fill the gap, otherwise a mere denial of a famous incident would have held no value as it leaves room for interpretations. In the very next two verses, the alternate incident has been narrated as “But Allah raised him to Himself” and in the next verse, makes it clearer than ever, by saying that “there will be none from the People of the Scripture except that they will believe in him before his death”.

The classical *mufasssirun* at the very most, have reported the prevalent opinions on the ‘how’ of the event. Considering all the exegetes as the sources of their

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<sup>27</sup> As Ibn ‘Atiya criticized Makki ibn Abi Tālib’s understanding of ‘*inni mutawaffeeka*’ as ‘I am accepting (or, satisfied) of your work’, by saying that this is a weak opinion based on linguistic reasons. *al-Muharrar al-Wajeez* (1/444)

<sup>28</sup> Ibid

<sup>29</sup> Todd Lawson articulates similar argument but with words “The point is that tafsîr, not the Qur’ân, denies the Crucifixion”, *The Crucifixion of Jesus in the Qur’ân and qur’ânic commentary*, 2, 35.

preferred opinion is unjust, because most of the central works like at-Tabarī, Ibn Kathīr and numerous others have relayed or quoted reports from the Companions, if not the Prophet himself, to support their positions. On the other hand, there are certain exegetes who haven't kept themselves constrained to the relaying method, thereby expressing personal opinions based on their linguistic skills and opinions which seemed suitable to them, regardless of whether such an exegesis has been put forward by anyone before them or not. They are quite subject to criticisms, as they have received.

## ii) *Tawaffa*

The claimants of the absence of unanimity have conflated between two resembling, but distinct facts. They are: the difference of opinion among the scholars between the “how” of the incident of ascension – and the fact that Jesus is alive in the heavens and will descend before the Hour. As mentioned earlier, there is no difference of opinion on the latter. As for the difference of opinion on whether Jesus was made asleep, or given momentary death before ascension, it certainly exists. Evidently, this difference of opinion isn't on the actual death of Jesus, rather on the “how” of the phenomenon of ascension. Ibn Jarīr at-Tabarī (d. 310AH) has mentioned four views on the same, under the verse Surah Āl-‘Imrān (3) 55.

The verse starts as:

{ إذ قال الله يا عيسى إني متوفيك ورافعك إلي... }

{[Mention] when Allāh said: O Jesus, indeed I will take you and raise you to Myself... } Surah Āl-‘Imrān (3) 55.

The verse sheds light on the phenomena of Jesus' ascension using the two words: *tawaffa* “توفى” (meaning: sleep,<sup>30</sup> take,<sup>31</sup> seize,<sup>32</sup> recover<sup>33</sup>) and *rafa'a* “رفع” (to raise), which is the centre of the discussion, as *توفى* has a wide range of meanings and a diverse usage.<sup>34</sup> The phenomena under scrutiny and

<sup>30</sup> Surah al-An'ām (6) 60 uses it as {It is He who doth take your souls by night (يتوفاكم بالليل), and hath knowledge of all that ye have done by day: by day doth He raise you up again; that a term appointed be fulfilled; In the end unto Him will be your return; then will He show you the truth of all that ye did.}

<sup>31</sup> Ibn Mandhūr, *Lisān ul-'Arab* (15/400)

<sup>32</sup> *ibid*

<sup>33</sup> *ibid*

<sup>34</sup> In Surah al An'ām (6) 152, Surah al-A'rāf (7) 85, the word “أوفوا الكيل” has been used as “fill the measures” ; in Surah al Baqarah (2) 40 “أوفوا بعهدي أوف بعهدكم” used as “fulfil my covenant and I shall fulfil your covenant”; in Surah al-Baqarah (2) 281 and Surah Aal Imran (3) 161 “ثم توفى كل نفس” used as “then every soul shall be paid” In Surah al-Insān (76) 7 “يوفون بالنظر” used as “they fulfill their vows”. In Surah az-Zumar (39) 42 however, the most pertinent usage is found, where the verse goes as {Allāh takes the souls (يتوفى الأنفس) at the time of their

discussion among the scholars was the ‘how’ of the event; in other words: the meaning of “توفى” (*tawaffa*) in this verse. Ibn Jarīr at-Tabarī (d. 310H) mentions all the opinions concerning it,<sup>35</sup> as the following:

1. The first opinion: That ‘*wafāt*’ here means sleep, i.e: Allah caused him to sleep, and then raised him towards Himself.
2. The second opinion: That ‘*wafāt*’ here, means Allah took (returned) him, and raised him to Himself.<sup>36</sup>
3. The third opinion: That ‘*wafāt*’ here, means Allah caused him to die, then raised him
4. The fourth opinion: That here ‘*wafāt*’ and *rafa’a* occurred in the opposite order, i.e.: Allah raised him, then took (returned) him to Himself. (those who held this opinion did so due to their view of the linguistic structure of this verse as *hysteron proteron*)

Then at-Tabarī summarized all the four opinions and declared the most authentic and predominant view as the second one, i.e.: Allah returned him from the worldly affair, and then raised him to Himself,<sup>37</sup> with there being no dispute over whether Jesus is alive or not.

(The following is a rough chart on what the exegetes reported a difference upon and what they agreed upon)

Exegete	Reported a difference of opinion on	Agreed upon	Reference
Ibn ‘Abbās (d. 68 AH)	—	Jesus is alive; They didn’t kill him for sure according to their assumption; He will descend	[ <sup>38</sup> ]

*death (موتها), and that which has not died, in its sleep; He withholds that against which He has decreed death, but looses the other till a stated term. Surely in that are signs for a people who reflect.* This is so far the most elaborative explanations, as sleep, death, and *tawaffa*, all three are mentioned together, making the position of each word very lucid. This verse sorts it out perfectly that *tawaffa* might be death in cases, but not always death outrightly.

<sup>35</sup> *Tafsīr at-Tabarī* (5/447)

<sup>36</sup> It is a popular usage of this word, as mentioned in the Surah al-Baqarah (2) 281 as {And fear a day wherein you shall be returned to God, and every soul shall be **paid** (توفى) in full what it has earned; and they shall not be wronged.}

Similarly, in Surah Āl -‘Imrān (3) 161: {It is not for a Prophet to be fraudulent; whoso defrauds shall bring the fruits of his fraud on the Day of Resurrection; then every soul shall be **paid** (توفى) in full what it has earned, and they shall not be wronged.}

<sup>37</sup> *Tafsīr at-Tabarī* (5/451)

<sup>38</sup> *Tafsīr at-Tabarī* (7/664); (7/662); (20/631)

Ibn Jarīr at-Tabarī (d. 310 AH)	The ‘how’ of the ascension; the substitution event	Jesus is alive, was raised to the heaven, and will descend	[ <sup>39</sup> ]
Ibn Abi Hātim ar-Rāzī (d. 327 AH)	The ‘how’ of the ascension	They didn’t kill him for sure according to their assumption; He will descend	[ <sup>40</sup> ]
Makkī ibn Abi-Tālib (d. 437 AH)		Jesus’ descension is from the signs of the Day of Judgement	[ <sup>41</sup> ]
Al-Baghawī (d. 516 AH)	The Substitution theory	They didn’t kill him rather Allah raised him to Himself	[ <sup>42</sup> ]
Zamakhsharī (d. 538 AH)	The Substitution theory	Substitution, only one was transformed	[ <sup>43</sup> ]
Ibn ‘Atiya (d. 546 AH)	The pronoun of the phrase {before his death}	Jesus is alive and on the second heaven, and will return and do what he has been decreed to do	[ <sup>44</sup> ]
Al-Qurtubī (d. 671 AH)	The Substitution theory	He is alive, and the Prophet mentioned his ascension	[ <sup>45</sup> ]
Abu Hayyān (d. 745 AH)	The Substitution theory	He is alive on the second heaven, and will return when is decreed	[ <sup>46</sup> ]
Ibn Kathīr (d. 774 AH)	The Substitution theory	Jesus is alive and on the second heaven, and will return and do what he has been decreed to do	[ <sup>47</sup> ]

<sup>39</sup> *Tafsīr at-Tabarī* (7/650-662)

<sup>40</sup> *Tafsīr ul-Qur’ān il-‘Adheem Musnadan* (p1111); (p1110)

<sup>41</sup> *al-Hidāyah ila Bulūgh in-Nihāya*, (p6686), under Surah Zukhruf (43) 61

<sup>42</sup> *Mu’ālim ut-Tanzeel* (2/307)

<sup>43</sup> *Al-Kasshāf* (2/176-77)

<sup>44</sup> *al-Muharrar al-Wajeez* (2/134), under {*bal rafa’a hu-Allahu ilayhi*}

<sup>45</sup> *Al-Jāmi’ li-Aḥkām al-Qur’ān* (4/100)

<sup>46</sup> *Al-Baḥr ul-Muḥeet* (3/407)

<sup>47</sup> *Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr* (4/334-66)

The second coming narrative is so independent of the interpretation of Surah an-Nisā' (4) 157-8 that Muslim scholars may even say that it has no contingency on this verse.<sup>48</sup> Rather it can be said that this verse advocates for the following two facts, with there being no indication about his second coming:

- Negation of the death of Jesus on the crucifix, by either of the Jews and the Romans,
- And affirmation of the fact that Allah saved him by raising him to Himself.

The Second Coming has been cited by Surah Zukhruf (43) 61 where descent of Jesus is termed as 'sign of the Hour'. Due to the mention of a pronoun rather than Jesus' name, a minority of commentators have considered this 'sign of the Hour' to be the Qur'ān itself. As irrelevant as it is, it also has no reason to be the Qur'ān as there is no mention of the Qur'ān in the entire context. The passage begins talking of Jesus by name, from verse 57 as { *When (Jesus) the son of Mary is held up as an example, behold, thy people raise a clamour thereat (in ridicule)!* } then the next verse mentions people referring to Jesus and ridiculing him { *And they say, "Are our gods best, or he?" ...* } then Allāh's praise is mentioned for Jesus, in contrast to what the disbelievers said about him { *He was no more than a servant: We granted Our favour to him, and We made him an example to the Children of Israel* }. Then the next verse is silent on Jesus, Allah reminds such a people of His Will as: { *And if it were Our Will, We could make angels from amongst you, succeeding each other on the earth* }. Then a pronoun is being referred to as { *And he shall be a Sign (for the coming of) the Hour (of Judgment) ...* }

It is evident that there has been no other object to be the referred to other than Jesus, as do the twelve reports mentioned by at-Tabarī fortify,<sup>49</sup> opposite the two weak reports referring to the Qur'ān as the sign of the Hour.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> It is interesting to note that Dr Reynolds begins the main body of his statement by saying that "*The locus classicus for the question of Jesus' death is sūrat al-nisā' (4) 157-8*" (Bulletin of SOAS, 72, 2 (2009), 238 © School of Oriental and African Studies). This is a criticism worthy statement because although it may be said so under certain situations, but saying so in general is misleading since the passage talks about the issue of crucifixion and ascension, and not particularly about the death of Jesus in general, as has been expounded upon earlier.

<sup>49</sup> *Tafsīr at-Tabarī* (20/631-34)

<sup>50</sup> (Ibid) In the first report, Qatāda attributes it to al-Hasan without specifying his hearing of this report from al-Hasan, and Qatāda is a known *mudallis*. Also, Qatāda is heard holding the first opinion as well in two of the twelve reports, and al-Hasan too transmits one of the reports from among the twelve. While in the second report, Qatāda is seen transmitting it simply on the authority of 'people'.

## The Substitution theory

As popular as the Substitution theory is, there effectively is no direct evidence of it being narrated by the Prophet himself.<sup>51</sup> All the narratives and versions of the Substitution theory can either be traced back to a companion (*saḥābī*) or a student of a Companion (*tābi ʿī*). Certain versions of it mention that a companion named Sergeus was made to look like Jesus before Judas kissed him, while Jesus was already raised before Judas could come, so when Judas entered upon the group of Jesus' apostles, he went and kissed Sergeus, thinking he is Jesus, thereby leading to the arrest of Sergeus from there, and hence the alleged crucifixion of Jesus took place.<sup>52</sup> While others would mention how Jesus was raised through a hole in the roof, and a substitute took his place on the cross. A version also suggests that all of the disciples were made to look like Jesus and the soldiers crucified one of them, leaving none of the two parties knowing whether it was Jesus who was crucified or one of themselves. An interesting possibility reported regarding the substitution theory is that Judas Iscariot, when betrayed Jesus, was himself made to look like Jesus and crucified in his place while shouting "I am not Jesus, I was the one who lead you to him".<sup>53</sup>

Some of the versions can be criticized while some others can be preferred based on certain factors. However, despite the prevalence of the narrative, we can't be certain about what exactly happened.

at-Tabarī has relayed many versions of it from the students of Ibn ʿAbbās, and a few from Ibn ʿAbbās himself,<sup>54</sup> which leave us with some possibility of a certain version of the Substitution narrative to be narrated by the Prophet himself; but then again, the evidence is speculative but not conclusive.

## Hidden apologetic motives behind 'the Second Coming' narrative?

Dr Reynolds suggests that the classical *mufasssirun* emphasized the role of Jesus in the eschaton and consequently, denied his death.<sup>55</sup> It is quite surprising to see this while we have authentic reports of Prophet Muhammad himself, explicitly

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<sup>51</sup> Abu Hayyān in his exegesis *al-Baḥr ul-Muḥeet* (under verse 4: 157)

<sup>52</sup> *Tafsīr at-Tabarī* (7/657)

<sup>53</sup> *ibid*

<sup>54</sup> *Tafsīr un-Nasā' ī* (#611), *Tafsīr at-Tabarī* (22/622) under the verse [61:14], *Tafsīr Ibn Abi Hātim* (#6233)

<sup>55</sup> *The Muslim Jesus: Dead or alive?* 250

mentioning the second coming of Jesus. In Sahih al-Bukhari, he is reported saying: "The Hour will not be established until the Son of Maryam (i.e.: Jesus) descends amongst you as a just ruler; he will break the cross, kill the pigs, and abolish the Jizya tax. Money will be in abundance so that nobody will accept it (as charitable gifts)".<sup>56</sup> In another report, he mentions the second coming of Jesus by saying "How will you be when the Son of Maryam (Jesus, the son of Mary) descends amongst you and your *imām* is among you".<sup>57</sup> Similarly, the Companion Jābir ibn ‘Abdullah reports that: I heard the Messenger of Allah (ﷺ) say: "A section of my people will not cease fighting for the Truth and will prevail till the Day of Resurrection. He said: Jesus, son of Mary would then descend and their (Muslims') commander would invite him to come and lead them in prayer, but he would say: No, some amongst you are commanders over some (others amongst you). This is the honour from Allāh for this *Ummah*."<sup>58</sup>

Even some of the details of his actions after the second coming are reported, as the Prophet said: "By Him in Whose Hand is my life, Ibn Maryam (Jesus Christ) would certainly pronounce *Talbiya* for *Hajj* or for ‘*Umra* or for both (simultaneously as a *Qiran*) in the valley of *Rauha*."<sup>59</sup>

His ascension is also mentioned in the famous Hadith of the Night Journey (*Isrā’*). Ibn Mājah reports in his Sunan that "On the night on which the Messenger of Allah (ﷺ) was taken on the Night Journey (*Isra’*), he met Ibrahim, Musa and 'Eisa, and they discussed the Hour. They started with Ibrahim, and asked him about it, but he did not have any knowledge of it. Then they asked Musa, and he did not have any knowledge of it. Then they asked 'Eisa bin Maryam, and he said: 'I have been assigned to some tasks before it happens.' As for as when it will take place, no one knows that except Allah. Then he mentioned Dajjal and said: 'I will descend and kill him, then the people will return to their own lands and will be confronted with Gog and Magog people, who will: "*swoop down from every mound.*" Q [21:96] They will not pass by any water but they will drink it, (and they will not pass) by anything but they will spoil it. They (the people) will beseech Allah, and I will pray to Allah to kill them. The earth will be filled with their stench and (the people) will beseech Allah and I will pray to Allah, then the sky will send down rain that will carry them and throw them in the sea. Then the mountains will turn to dust and the earth will be stretched out like a hide. I have been promised that when that

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<sup>56</sup> Sahih al-Bukhari 2476, and Sahih al-Bukhari 3448 is a longer version of it

<sup>57</sup> Sahih al-Bukhari 3449

<sup>58</sup> Sahih Muslim 156

<sup>59</sup> Sahih Muslim 1252a

happens, the Hour will come upon the people, like a pregnant woman whose family does not know when she will suddenly give birth."<sup>60</sup>

Then there are reports about the slaying of the Antichrist by Jesus and the location where it will happen, Abū Dāwūd relates one such narration as: “The Messenger of Allah (ﷺ) mentioned the Dajjal (Antichrist) saying: If he comes forth while I am among you, I shall be the one who will dispute with him on your behalf, but if he comes forth when I am not among you, a man must dispute on his own behalf, and Allah will take my place in looking after every Muslim. Those of you who live up to his time should recite over him the opening verses of Surat al-Kahf, for they are your protection from his trial. We asked: How long will he remain on the earth? He replied: Forty days, one like a year, one like a month, one like a week, and rest of his days like yours. We asked: Messenger of Allah, will one day’s prayer suffice us in this day which will be like a year? He replied: No, you must make an estimate of its extent. Then Jesus, son of Mary will descend at the white minaret to the east of Damascus. He will then catch him up at the date of *Ludd* and kill him.”<sup>61</sup>

The variety of spheres of the end times in which Jesus’ descension has been reported is so overwhelming that it can arguably be used as an evidence for concluding the rejection of the idea that the narrative was a conspiracy by the classical *mufasssirun*. A second criterion, which apparently is quite objective *per se*, is the multiplicity of *asānīd* of ‘the second coming’ traditions, through which we can ascertain the historicity of this narrative, and it being originating from none other than the Prophet himself. (See Fig.1 – Fig. 9 at the end of this document)

Dr Reynolds puts forward two theories as the possible motives behind the development of the second coming narrative among the mainstream Islamic tradition. They are as follows:

- “These traditions play a distinctly anti-Christian effect”

According to Dr Reynolds, ‘the second coming’ narrative gives the Muslims an upper hand in the polemics of the eschaton, due to despicable elements like “breaking the Cross, killing the swine”.<sup>62</sup> This is too shallow of a judgement on a text, because drawing inferences based on alleged conspiracies would make every succeeding religion as a reaction to the previous one, since differences between religions is an inevitable reality. Secondly, I find an unsettling contrast

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<sup>60</sup> Sunan Ibn Mājah 4081, graded Sahih by Hāfidh Zubayr Alizai

<sup>61</sup> Sunan Abi Dāwūd 4321, graded Sahih by Al-Albānī

<sup>62</sup> The statement refers to abolishment of polytheism, unlawful things made lawful, and abrogation of certain laws



in this inference, since if classical Muslim scholarship were to use innovative deception for bringing strength to their polemic stance, they would have evidently been the first to agree on the prevalent fact of Jesus' death, thereby gaining a much superior theological position over the entire Christian theology. Jesus' death would have been a bliss for the classical Muslim apologists, since convincing someone against a (once) dead god is way trivial than convincing them against an alive one.

To infer such a far-fetched narrative is inconsistent with the facts as well, as the most feasible and likely method of gaining a theologically strong position would have been to holistically scrutinize the available scriptures, namely the Psalms, the Old and the New Testament, and then develop a new doctrine filling the possible points of criticism to suit the best of Islam's interests – apparently which approach is nonexistent; rather not even an essence of it is traceable in any of the stages of development of the entire Islamic thought. Furthermore, if classical Muslim scholars would have agreed on the traditional narrative of the People of the Book, it would have saved them the oft-criticized, and apparently a highly provocative and a sensational viewpoint, taken 6 centuries after an established history. Having considered these aspects, it is quite astonishing to conclude by saying that these points if anything, are rather indicative of the absence of a protagonist of Islam at the highest authority.

- “An anti-Shii effect is achieved”

This theory in itself isn't in accordance with the fact it is being projected upon. The Shias and the Sunnis are united on the fact that Jesus isn't an alternative narrative to suppress the coming of the Mahdi, though they do differ on their versions of Mahdis.<sup>63</sup> Furthermore, the Sunni belief doesn't conflate Jesus with the Mahdi, nor do consider him as a substitute for Mahdi,<sup>64</sup> rather the classical Hadith books report authentic narrations mentioning Jesus with Mahdi in the end times. For instance, al-Hārith ibn Abi Usāma (d. 282AH) reports in his

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<sup>63</sup> The Sunnis believe that the Mahdī will be a person at the end of times, with the name 'Muhammad ibn 'Abdillah' from the lineage of the Prophet's daughter Fatima; initially a layman, who will eventually be rectified into the Mahdi in a single night. On the other hand, the Shias believe that the Mahdi has already born 13 centuries years ago, and that due to the persecution by the Sunnis, went into hiding in some cave with the real Qur'ān, and will come out at the end of times.

<sup>64</sup> Dr Reynolds takes note as “Indeed, some Sunnī traditions insist that there would be no other Mahdī but Jesus himself. Thus Jesus became the Sunni answer to the Shii Qa'im” by relying on the weak report conflating between the two. Ibn Mājah narrates it in his *Sunan (Kitāb al-fitan, 24, bāb shiddat az-zamān, 36/114, #4039)* but the third narrator in the *isnād* is Muhammad ibn Khālid al-Janādī, an unknown transmitter with discrepant reports (see *Tahdhīb ut-Tahdhīb* by Ibn Hajar (5/561-2)), leaving this report unacceptable. Also, the opposite is proven from multiple reports like *Sunan Abi Dawud* 4284, 4285, *Sunan Ibn Mājah* 4085, 4086.

Musnad with a sound *isnād* from the Companion Jābir ibn ‘Abdullah that the Prophet said “Jesus the son of Mary will descend, then their leader al-Mahdī would say: Come, lead us in prayer. To which, Jesus will respond by saying: ‘No, certainly some of you are leaders over the others.’ As a nobility of this *Ummah*”.<sup>65</sup> Similarly, a much-detailed narration mentioning the two in one scenario is popular in many Hadith books. Ahmad ibn Hambal (d. 241 AH) for example, transmits a long report ending with “... then Jesus the son of Mary will descend, and will be called *en bloc*, so he will respond: O people! What stops you from coming up to [attack] the repugnant liar [i.e.: The Antichrist]? They will say: He is a man-demon! Then they will set forth until they reach Jesus the son of Mary, then the prayer will be established, and it will be said to him: Come forth [for leading prayer] O Spirit of Allāh! To which he will say: Let your imam lead the prayer, that he prays with you. ...”<sup>66</sup> And the ‘imam’ Jesus is referring to, is the Mahdi, as mentioned in the previous report. Similar portion has been transmitted by Muslim ibn Hajjāj (d. 261AH) in his Sahih.<sup>67</sup>

The classical Shi’i commentator ‘Alī ibn Ibrāhīm al-Qummī (d. 329AH), as Dr Reynolds has pointed out, displays the Shi’i belief in regards to the two awaited figures by saying “*Jesus will come down to this world before the Day of Resurrection. All of the Jewish and Christian communities will believe in him before his death*”, and adds to affirm the belief that the Mahdi is a distinct person than Jesus by saying “*He will pray behind the Mahdī*”.<sup>68</sup> Similar belief has been expressed by the highly praised Shi’i hadith scholar al-Hurr al-‘Āmilī (d. 1104 AH) when he reports a narration attributed to ‘Ali ibn Abi Tālib mentioning that “Allah will kill him (the Antichrist) in Syria at the hand of the one whom Jesus prays behind (i.e.: the Mahdī)”<sup>69</sup> – which sums up the Shi’i belief on the issue, proving it to be perfectly consistent with the Sunni belief system in this particular issue.

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<sup>65</sup> Al-Hārith ibn Abi Usāma in his Musnad, as reported in *al-Manār ul-Muneef fi al-Sahīhi wad-Da’if* of Ibn al-Qayyim (p147); and by Abu Ya’la as reported in *Majma uz-Zawaed* of al-Haythamī (7/291), and Musnad Abu ‘Awāna (#317)

<sup>66</sup> *Musnad Ahmad* 14954 (Sahih according to Shu‘ayb al-Arnaūt “on the condition of Muslim ibn Hajjāj (d. 261AH)”), and Ibn Khuzayma in *at-Tawhīd* (1/102), and at-Taḥāwī in *Sharh mushkil al-Āthār* (5694)

<sup>67</sup> Sahih Muslim 156

<sup>68</sup> Qummī, 1:165, on Surah an-Nisā’ (4) 159

<sup>69</sup> *Al-Eeqādh min al-haj’at il-burhān ‘alal-raj’a* (1/293) of Muhammad ibn al-Hasan al-Hurr al-‘Āmilī

## **The Second coming from the Hadithic perspective**

Despite Dr Reynolds' paper's abstract seeming promising on a holistic discourse on Jesus' death "in Islām", his approach was plainly constrained to the Qur'ān and its commentaries only. The Hadith corpus being the paragon of understanding the Qur'ān, expounds upon all sorts of core and critical points of the Islamic tradition. Rightly so, as the Hadith springs forth from the source relaying the Qur'ān. Studying the issue through the Hadith lens gives new insights to the matter, as one of its exclusivities is the presence of the Prophetic narrations in multiple spheres of the end times talking of Jesus, thereby portraying the degree of prevalence of this belief during the era of the Prophet and his companions. The charts at the end of this paper mention some of the narrations reported regarding the same in the mainstream Hadith corpus, though they are non-exhaustive. (*Refer to Fig. 1 – Fig. 9 provided at the end of this paper*)

## **Crucifixion – The Biblical perspective(s)**

Due to the absence of a clear verse and differences of opinions on the process of crucifixion and ascension, Dr Reynolds concludes by saying that critical reading of the Qur'ān must be done in the light of the previous scriptures (Jewish and Christian) rather than the Islamic exegeses. Although the Islamic tradition in itself allows quoting the previous scriptures,<sup>70</sup> but as a rule of thumb one can't expect the Islamic scholarship to accept a biblical narrative after it being in clear conflict with the Qur'ānic narrative. Other than mere devotional reasons, the fact that the gospels show inharmony over analogous verses is a reason enough to view the Biblical narrative of the Crucifixion with strict scrutiny, and it ultimately comes down to the preservation and textual criticism of the New Testament. However, that isn't the discussion for this paper; here we will go with the theory that all the gospels we have today were relayed from first-hand accounts and were perfectly intact until they got mass transmitted.

In the conventionally earliest of the four gospels – the Gospel of Mark – we see that at the 9<sup>th</sup> hour after Jesus was hanged on the cross, he is heard crying "*Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?*",<sup>71</sup> while coming to the latest of them all, John's theme

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<sup>70</sup> The famous Hadith of Prophet Muhammad pbuh in which he says "Relate traditions from Banu Israel, there is no harm (in it)". Sahih al-Bukhari 3461

<sup>71</sup> Mark 15: 34 (KJV)

is a calm Jesus, the typical ‘lamb of slaughter’, seen dying tranquilly after drinking the sour wine, saying “It is finished”<sup>72</sup> – unlike Mark and Matthew’s narrative where he cried out loudly before breathing his last.<sup>73</sup>

Coming to the eyewitnesses of the empty tomb, Mark narrates that the two women “saw a young man clothed in a long white robe” who gives them the tidings of Jesus being risen.<sup>74</sup> Luke, on the other hand, reports that there were two men instead of one.<sup>75</sup> Mark suggests that it was only Mary Magdalene who saw him and went to inform the other disciples only to find them unbelieving of her;<sup>76</sup> Matthew reports that after rising, Jesus met Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James and Joses while they were on their way to the other disciples.<sup>77</sup> Interestingly, Luke makes it to a group as he says “they, and certain *other women* with them, came to the tomb”,<sup>78</sup> opening up a bit on who these women were, Luke later says “It was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other *women* that were with them, who told these things to the apostles”.<sup>79</sup> And John’s variant has a differing sequence of this event; as initially Mary came to the sepulchre, and on finding the stone removed, went running to Simon Peter and ‘the disciple Jesus loved’. When they both came and saw linen cloths lying there, they went away not knowing that Jesus would rise again on the third day, as there was no angel to inform them. As soon as the two leave, Mary stoops down to see the inside of the tomb and sees two angels, and as she turns around, she finds Jesus standing right there outside the tomb, who for some reason poses as a gardener for a while but then opens up.<sup>80</sup>

All these variations leave the reader with pressing questions and the highly considerable thought that if four authorities on the same incident could get four different narratives, there could possibly be a fifth narrative too where neither Mary nor anyone else witness any of it at all.

John goes against the majority opinion suggesting that Jesus was found at the very outside of the tomb.<sup>81</sup> Matthew reports that “there was a great earthquake when an angel of the Lord descended” to roll the stone of the grave.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> John 19: 30

<sup>73</sup> Mark 15: 37, Matthew 27: 50

<sup>74</sup> Mark 16: 5

<sup>75</sup> Luke 24: 4

<sup>76</sup> Mark 16: 9-11

<sup>77</sup> Matthew 28: 8-9

<sup>78</sup> Luke 24: 1

<sup>79</sup> Luke 24: 10

<sup>80</sup> John 20: 1-17

<sup>81</sup> John 20: 14

<sup>82</sup> Matthew 28: 2

Interestingly, no gospel other than that of Matthew's mentions any earthquake at all, which seems to be quite a hard fact as to be missed.

In John's narrative, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb on the first day of the week "while it was still dark",<sup>83</sup> Luke would agree with him,<sup>84</sup> while Mark seems confused about what constitutes the early hours as he says "And very early in the morning the first day of the week, they came unto the sepulchre at the rising of the sun".<sup>85</sup>

Luke mentions the typical moment of betrayal of Judas, when he kissed Jesus and Jesus said to him knowing his betrayal beforehand "Judas, are you betraying the Son of Man with a kiss?",<sup>86</sup> while John renders the entire narrative of the kiss as void, the guards seek him by calling out his name. Matthew's specific narrative of the meeting of the two parties portrays as if Jesus was unaware of the deception as he reports Jesus asking Judas "Friend, why have you come?" when Judas kisses him.<sup>87</sup>

A peculiar thing about the Biblical narrative of rising is the contradiction on the period of Jesus' stay inside the tomb.<sup>88</sup> In Matthew 12: 38, when Jesus was asked for a sign, after becoming angry at such a question, he said "there shall be no sign given to it, except the sign of Jonah: For as Jonas was three days and three nights in the whale's belly, so shall the son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth".<sup>89</sup> It is interesting to note that all the four gospels on the other hand, share the consensus on a period of two nights and one day only,<sup>90</sup> only 50% of the time of the miracle of Jonah. Being dead inside the tomb is also in conflict with Jonah's miracle, since he was alive all this period.

Somehow after the focus of an entire nation being on Jesus and Jesus only, I find it very unusual that four authorities on the same incident got differing, and sometimes even contradicting narratives of the Gospel.

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<sup>83</sup> John 20: 1

<sup>84</sup> Luke 24: 1

<sup>85</sup> Mark 16: 2

<sup>86</sup> Luke 22: 48

<sup>87</sup> Matthew 26: 49-50

<sup>88</sup> Ahmed Deedat, "Crucifixion or Cruci-fiction", 68

<sup>89</sup> Matthew 12: 39-40

<sup>90</sup> Mark 16: 1; Matthew 28: 1; Luke 24: 1; John 20:1 (KJV)

## Conclusion

Mālik ibn Anas heard that a person came to Muqātil ibn Sulaymān and asked him about the color of the dog of the People of the Cave<sup>91</sup>. Muqātil narrated: I didn't know what to say to him. Mālik said to him: Why didn't you say 'spotted'; if you would have said this, you wouldn't have found anyone answering back.<sup>92</sup> The theory being critiqued reminds me of this anecdote because just like the color of that dog isn't relevant to anyone, so is the 'how' of the incident of the crucifixion to the Islamic tradition, as the necessary knowledge about the incident has been conveyed with perfect lucidity. The Qur'ān, despite not being elaborative on the process of the incident, is still explicit on the following facts:

- That Jesus didn't die at the hands of the Pharisees or the Romans, nor on the crucifix as Allah raised him to the heavens, and the entire incident was 'made to appear so to them'.
- That Jesus, being the 'Sign of the Hour', will descend before the Eschaton and fulfill certain duties Allah has encumbered him with.

If the Qur'ān doesn't elucidate on the superfluous facts and consequently some of the exegetes express differing opinions on those subtleties, it doesn't imply the Qur'ān in itself has contradictions.

On theological grounds, after all these evidences, Muslim academia weren't ever in need of proving the fact that Jesus is alive, since being alive isn't the necessary precursor to the second coming.<sup>93</sup> The second coming narrative could have been concorded with verses from the Qur'ān where Allah reminds mankind of His Will over life and death. An example of which is Surah Yāsēn (36) 77-83:

*{Doth not man see that it is We Who created him from sperm? yet behold! he (stands forth) as an open adversary!} {And he makes comparisons for Us, and forgets his own (origin and) Creation: He says, "Who can give life to (dry) bones and decomposed ones (at that)?"} {Say: He will revive them Who produced them at the first, for He is Knower of every creation.} {"The same Who produces for you fire out of the green tree, when behold! ye kindle therewith (your own fires)!} {"Is not He Who created the heavens and the earth able to create the like thereof?" - Yea, indeed! for He is the Creator Supreme, of*

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<sup>91</sup> In reference to the incident of the cave dwellers, mentioned in the 18<sup>th</sup> chapter of the Qur'ān, named after it as "Chapter of the Cave" (Surah Kahf)

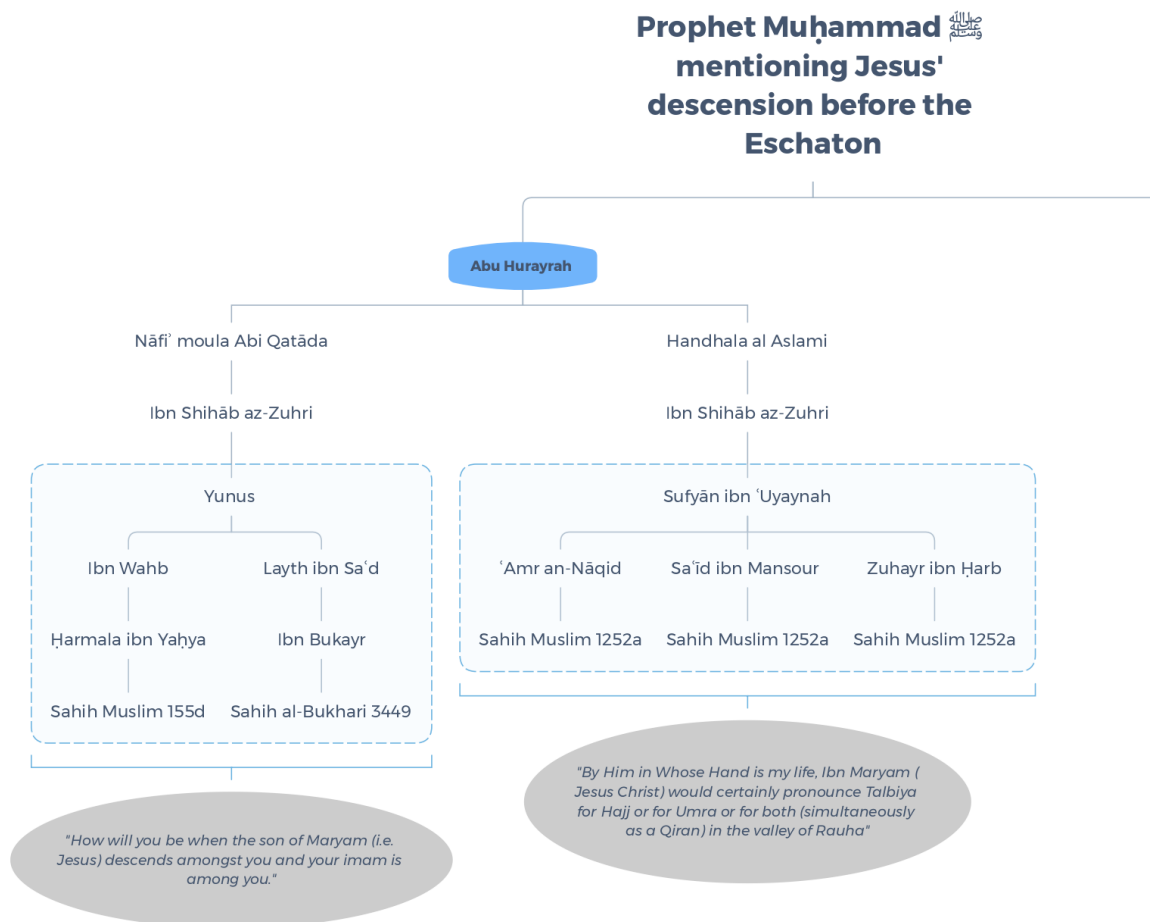
<sup>92</sup> *Tahdhīb ut-Tahdhīb* (6/397)

<sup>93</sup> N. Robinson points out the idea well by saying "There is nothing to indicate that his future descent requires him to have been spared death on the cross." N. Robinson, "Jesus", 17b-18a.

*skill and knowledge (infinite)!} {Verily, when He intends a thing, His Command is, "be", and it is!} {So glory to Him in Whose hands is the dominion of all things: and to Him will ye be all brought back.} <sup>94</sup>*

To summarize the critical study of the Biblical narrative of the Crucifixion it can be said that it is unlike the expectation of an unbiased reader expecting the gospels to be the perfect monograph of the Crucifixion. The degree and number of differences among the gospels' narratives is surprising, so much so that it leaves the reader with a serious question mark on their reliability.

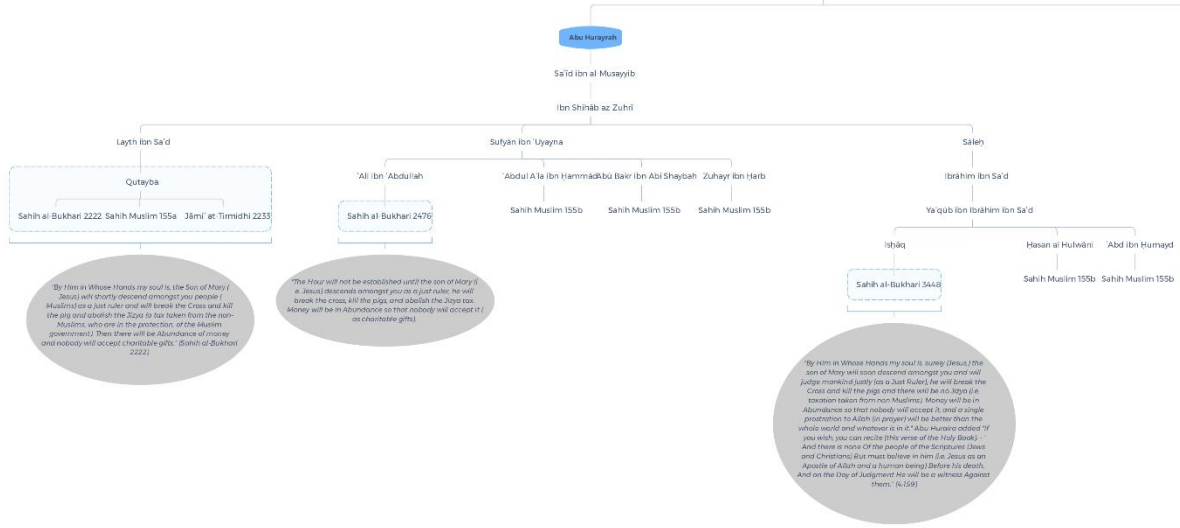
**(Following are Fig.1-Fig.9)**



*Fig. 1-a (via Abu Hurayrah)*

<sup>94</sup> Yusuf 'Ali's translation for Surah Yāsēn (36) 77-83

**Prophet Muhammad ﷺ mentioning Jesus' descension before the Eschaton**



**Fig. 1-b (via Abu Hurayrah)**

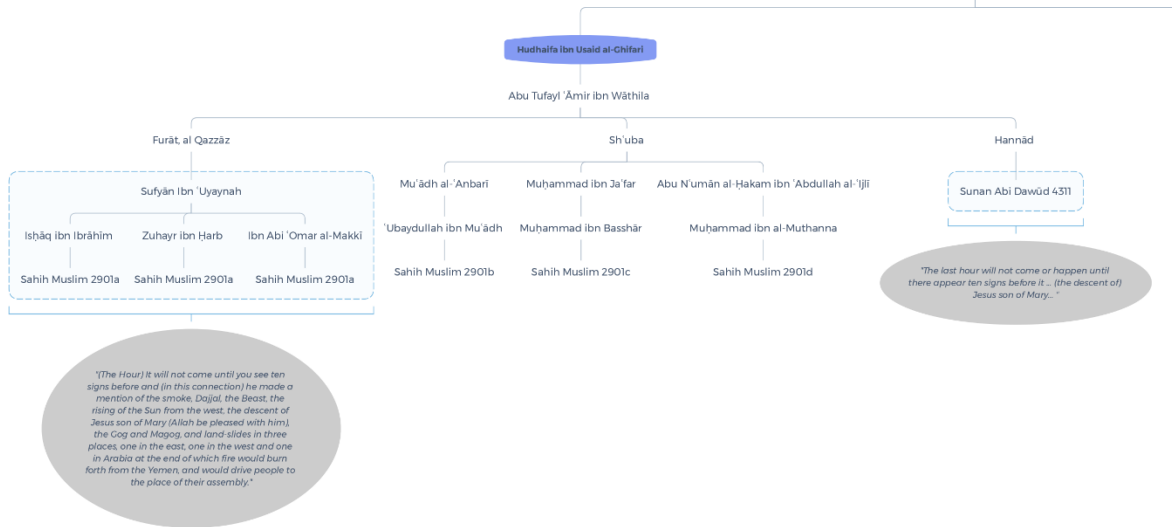
**Prophet Muhammad ﷺ mentioning Jesus' descension before the Eschaton**



**Fig. 1-c (via Abu Hurayrah)**

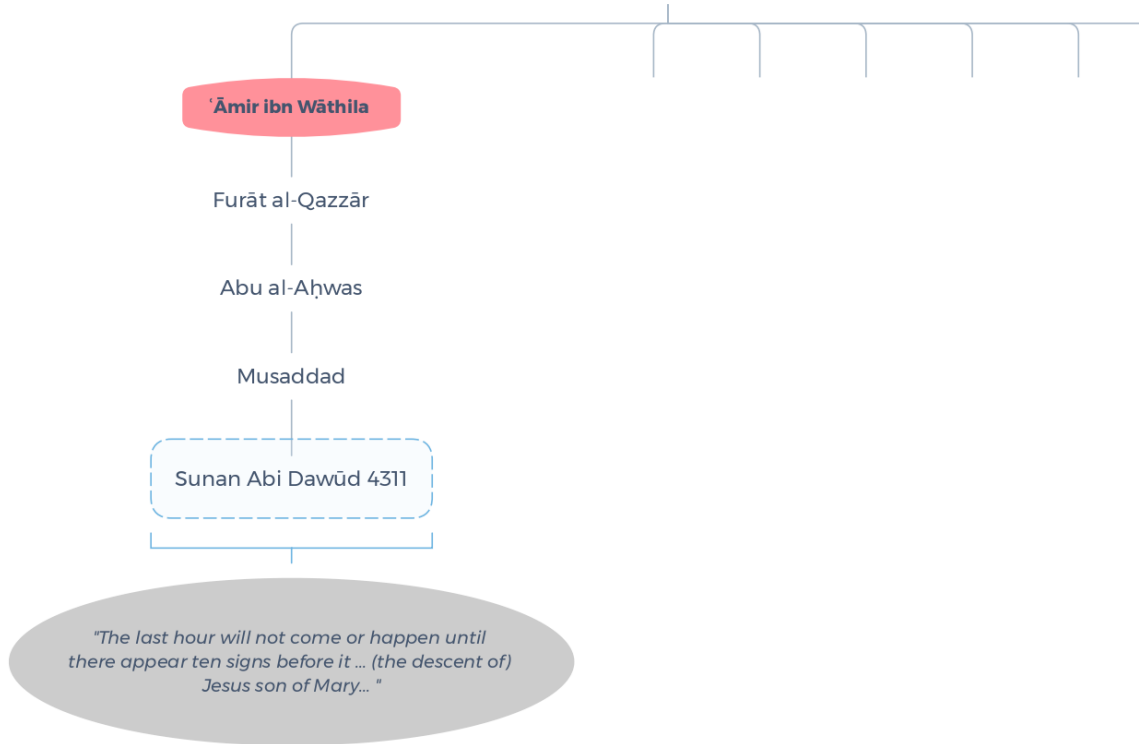


**Prophet Muḥammad ﷺ  
mentioning Jesus'  
descent before the  
Eschaton**



*Fig. 2 (via Hudhayfa ibn Usayd al-Ghifari)*

## Prophet Muḥammad ﷺ mentioning Jesus' descent before the Eschaton



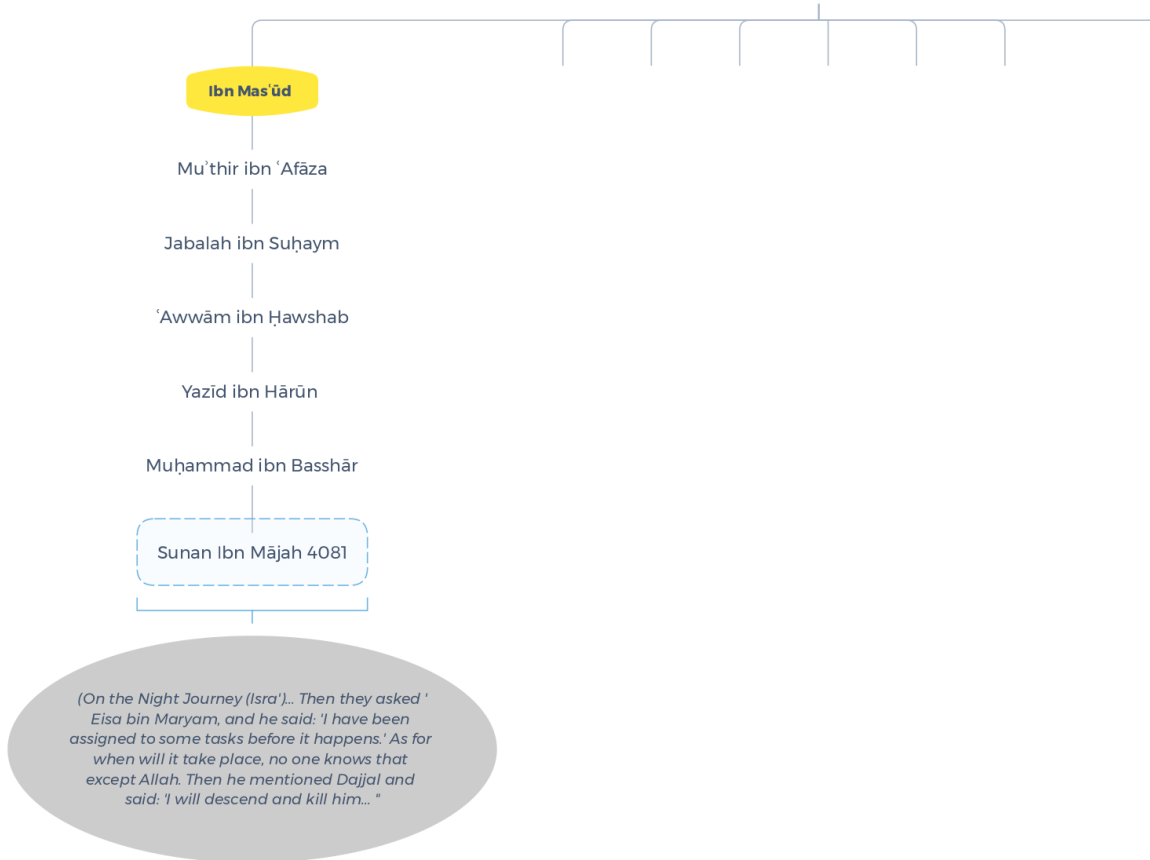
*Fig. 3 (via 'Āmir ibn Wāthila)*

Prophet Muḥammad ﷺ  
 mentioning Jesus'  
 descension before the  
 Eschaton



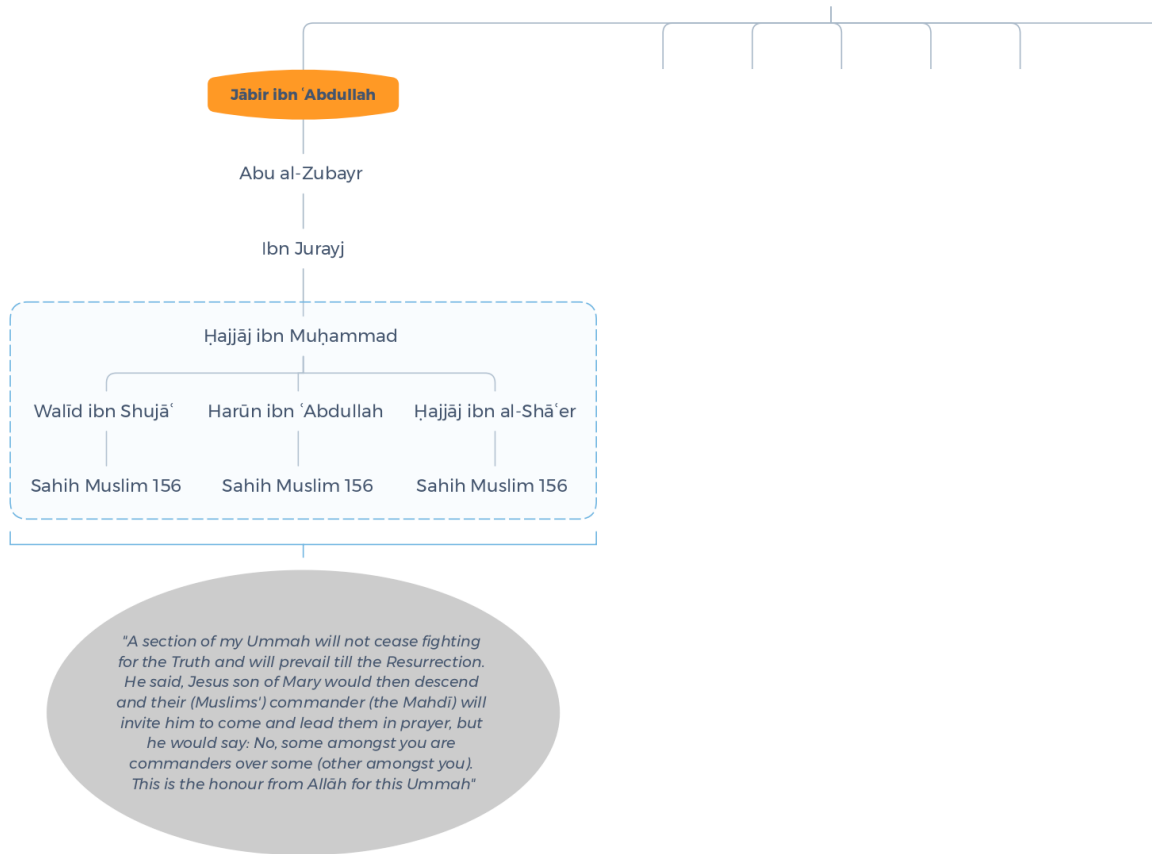
Fig. 4 (via Ibn 'Omar)

**Prophet Muḥammad ﷺ  
mentioning Jesus'  
descent before the  
Eschaton**



*Fig. 5 (via Ibn Mas'ūd)*

**Prophet Muḥammad ﷺ  
mentioning Jesus'  
descent before the  
Eschaton**



*Fig. 6 (via Jābir ibn 'Abdillah)*

Prophet Muḥammad ﷺ  
 mentioning Jesus'  
 descension before the  
 Eschaton

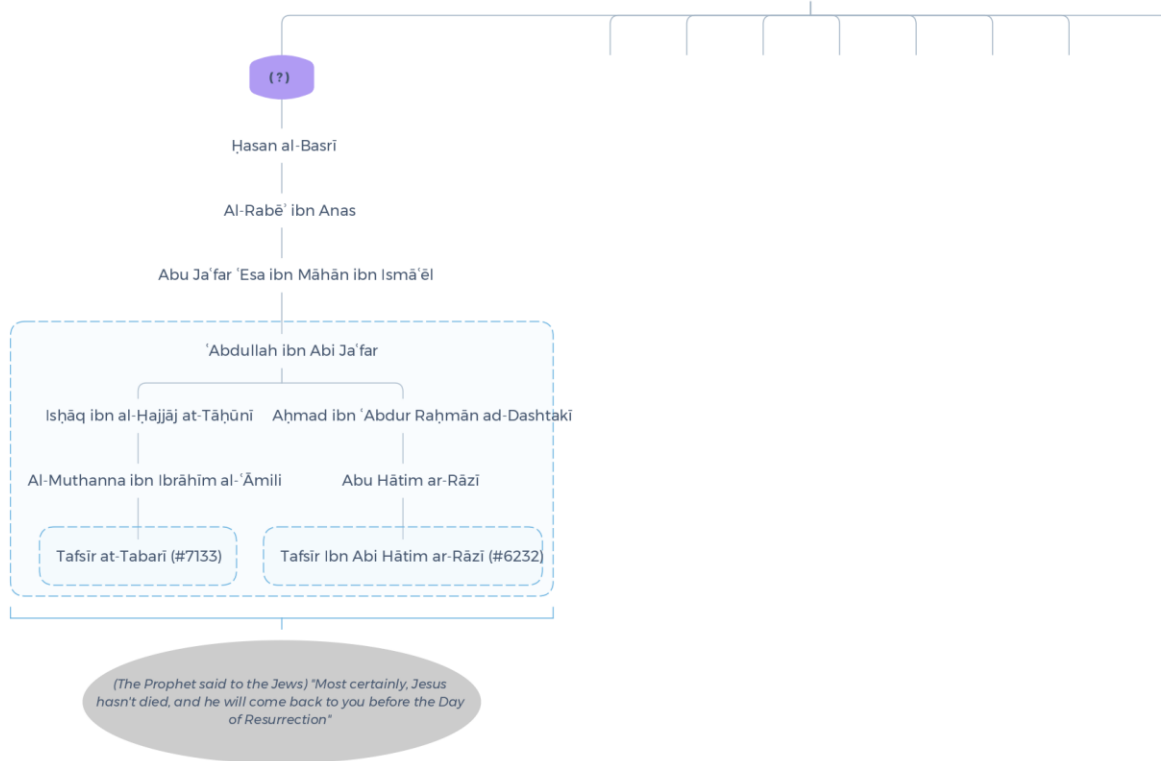
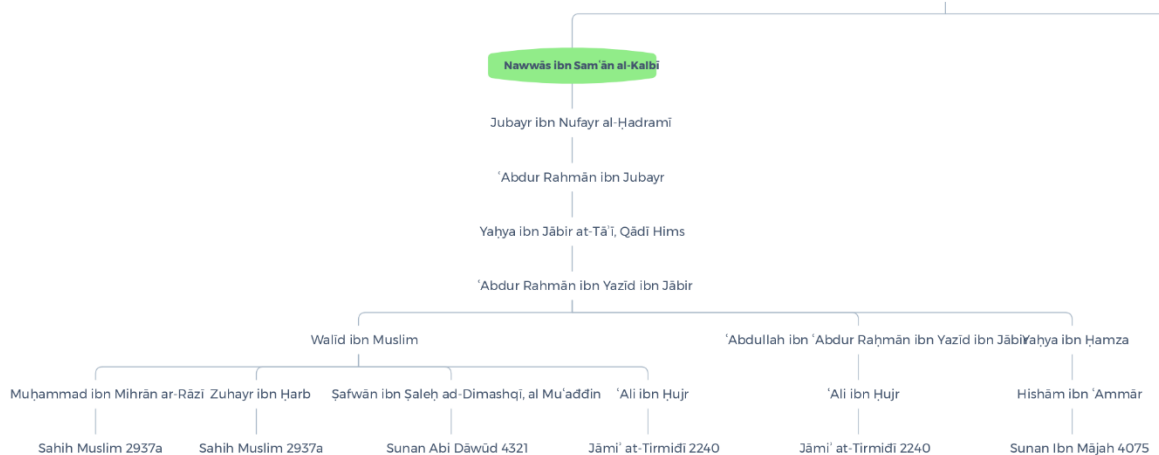


Fig. 7 (via Hasan al-Basrī – A *mursal* report)<sup>95</sup>

<sup>95</sup> This report is a proof that Prophet Muhammad pbuh did actually inform his companions that Jesus hasn't died, contrary to what Dr Reynolds assumed. "Muslim Jesus: Dead or alive?" 258

**Prophet Muḥammad ﷺ  
mentioning Jesus'  
descent before the  
Eschaton**



*"He would then call (that young man) and he will come forward laughing with his face gleaming (with happiness) and it would be at this very time that Allah would send Christ, son of Mary, and he will descend at the white minaret in the eastern side of Damascus wearing two garments lightly dyed with saffron and placing his hands on the wings of two Angels. When he would lower his head, there would fall beads of perspiration from his head, and when he would raise it up, beads like pearls would scatter from it... He would then search for him (Dajjal) until he would catch hold of him at the gate of Ludd and would kill him."*

*Fig. 8 (via Nawwās ibn Sam‘ān al-Kalbī)*

*Fig. 9 (via Mujamma‘ ibn Jāriya)*

## Prophet Muḥammad ﷺ mentioning Jesus' descension before the Eschaton





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