

Five Classical Exegetes' Commentaries on Ma'idah (the Heavenly Table) Episode, 5:111-115

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özet

Maide Suresi, 5:111-115 Ayetleri Üzerine Beş Klasik Müfessirin Yorumu. Bu makalenin ana konusunu Maide Suresinin 112-115. ayetlerinin klasik tefsir kitaplarındaki yorumları teskil etmektedir. Üzerinde yoğunlaşılacak temel soru acaba klasik müfessirler Kur'an'da geçen bu kıssanın yorumunda ne gibi güçlüklerle karşılaşmışlardır ve bu güçlükleri hangi yollarla çözmeye çalışmışlardır. Kıssanın Hristiyanlığı da ilgilendirmesinden dolayı araştırma boyunca sık sık sorulan sorulardan birisi de klasik müfessirlerimizin söz konusu geleneğe olan asinalık oranıydı. Sonuç olarak klasik müfessirlerimizin kıssanın izahında çok sayıda tefsir rivayeti kullanarak anlatımı zenginleştirdiği gözlemlenmiştir. Bu rivayetlerin bazıları irrasyonel anlatımlardır ve genellikle Hristiyanlıktan ziyade müfessirin yaşadığı dönemdeki popüler kültüre dayanmaktadır. Yalnız Zemahseri ve İbn Kesir gibi müfessirler, tefsirde kullanılan rivayetlere daha eleştirel yaklaşmışlar ve diğer müfessirlerle karşılaştırıldığında bu anlatımla ilgili Hristiyan geleneğine ait detayları daha iyi değerlendirmişlerdir.

anahtar kelimeler

Hz. İsa, Müfessir, Kıssa, Maide, Havari, Hristiyan

The aim of this article is to analyse the narrative of 5:111-115 and its interpretation in classical exegesis. For many Occidental scholars the episode displays considerable complexity, and so they have tried to adduce plausible explanations. For instance, T. Nöldeke held the view that these verses are a confusion of the Gospel story of the feeding of the multitude with that of the Lord's Supper.¹ According to Bell, this episode does not go back to literary sources, but is based on some meagre answer to an enquiry

1 Quoted in Jeffery, A. (1938) *The Foreign Vocabulary of the Qur'an* (Baroda, Oriental Institute), 225

regarding the origin of the rite.² N. Robinson considers this episode the most puzzling feature of Surah Ma'idah. For him, a typological confusion of the New Testament with the Old may be the key to the understanding of the episode.³ While not disregarding the information provided by these scholars the purpose of this article is to try to show how five classical Muslim exegetes have interpreted these verses, the difficulties they encountered and how they overcame all of these challenges, what were their main hermeneutic devices and, most importantly, their attitudes towards several reports. The importance of this investigation lies in the discovery that even within the highly structured confines of Qur'anic exegesis certain discernible changes in understanding have taken place. We will make frequent references to five major Muslim commentators and their works, namely Tabari (225/839-310/923), Tusi (385/995-460/1056), Zamakhshari (467/1075-538/1144), Razi (549/1149-604/1207) and Ibn. Kathir (701/1301-774/1373). It must be noted that governing the principles of selection is the attempt to choose those *tafsirs* most widely read and highly esteemed by Muslims through the ages.

Surah Ma'idah's account of the 'heavenly table' runs as follows:

i. God addresses the disciples and the disciples reply to God's command

'And when I inspired the disciples, (saying): Believe in Me and in My messenger, they said: We believe. Bear witness that we are *muslims*⁴ (have surrendered unto Thee)', 5:111.

ii. The disciples put a request to Jesus and he reproves them:

'When the disciples said: O Jesus, son of Mary! Is your Lord able to send down to us a table spread with food from Heaven? He said: fear God, if you are indeed believers', 5:112.

iii. The disciples respond to him

(They said) 'we wish to eat thereof and to be stronger in faith, and to know that you have indeed told us the truth and that we ourselves are its witnesses', 5:113.

iv. Jesus puts their request to God

'Jesus, son of Mary, said; 'O God, our Lord! Send us from heaven a table spread (with food) that there may be for us -for the first and the last of us- a festival and a sign from You; and provide us with sustenance, for You are the Best of sustainers', 5:114.

2 Bell, R. (1953) *Introduction to the Qur'an* (Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press), 163

3 Robinson, N. (1991) *Christ in Islam and Christianity: The Representation of Jesus in the Qur'an and the Classical Commentaries*, (London, Macmillan Press Ltd), 18

vi. God replies to Jesus' request on their behalf

'God said: I send it down for you, but if any of you after that disbelieves, then I will punish him with a torment wherewith I have not inflicted any of (My) creatures, 5:115.

1. The Relation Between 5:111 and 5:112

Almost all of the classical exegetes have dealt with the explanation of the *idh* at the beginning of 5:112. The best example of this is Razi's explanation. It should be remembered that this relation is not confined to grammar or lexical affinity; it is directly connected with coherence and theological dogma. Razi offers two solutions. In his first attempt he connects the verse 5:111 to 5:112 by the relative pronoun *idh* in 5:112, so the verses can be rendered together as *awhaytu ila al-hawariyyina idh qala al-hawariyyuna...*⁵ In his second option he begins his explanation with the virtual, *taqdir*, sense of the verse. According to Razi, at the beginning of the verse there is a hidden verb *udhkur* (remember or mention). By reference to this *taqdir* he connects this verse with a previous verse.⁶ Tabari's opinion is essentially the same here. Razi, uses this explanation to justify his further comments on the verses on the grounds of the coherence of the Qur'an. The possibilities he provides, however, have already been emphasised by his predecessors.

2. The Etymology and Meaning of the word Hawariyyun (Disciples/Apostles)

The first problem the commentators have tackled is the definition of the term *hawariyyun*. Who are the *hawariyyun*? Why are they called *hawariyyun* in the Qur'an? What is the meaning of this word? Having given a brief Arabic paraphrase of 5:111, Tabari glosses the term *hawari* as *wuzara-u 'isa* (viziers of Jesus or ministers, helpers, assistants)⁷ and says 'We have already talked about this term elsewhere, therefore there is no need to repeat it here'. More information about this term is found in the interpretation of 3:52.⁸ Referring to the dispute over why they are called *hawariyy-*

4 Mawdudi draws attention to the use of the word 'muslims' for the disciples and says that it means that their religion is Islam not Christianity without going into any detail. (Mawdudi, Abu Acla al- (1977) *The Meaning of the Qur'an* in (tr. and ed.) M. Akbar and A. Kamal (Lahore, Islamic Publication Ltd) VII.82.

5 Razi, Fakhr al-Din al-, *Mafatih al-Ghayb*, Beirut: Dar al-Fikr 1995, III.694

6 *Ibid.*, III.694

7 Tabari, Ibn Jarir al- (1954) *Jamic al-Bayan can Ta'wil Ay al-Qur'an* (Egypt, np) XI.217.

8 'When Jesus became conscious of their disbelief, he cried: who will be my helpers in the cause of God? The disciples said: we will be God's helpers...'

yun among the *ahl al-ta'wil*, Tabari lists seven reports and traces four of them back to earlier traditionalists. Four out of the seven agree that the word denotes a person who wears white clothes.⁹ In addition, some of the reports explain that they are named *hawari* because of the whiteness of their garments and because they were launderers, *ghassalun*.

The glosses of two reports are fundamentally different from those of the majority. The first report described one of the companions of the prophet as a *hawari*. When asked what a *hawari* is, he replied 'he who is suitable to become caliph'. The second report associates *hawari* with *asfiya* (true friends).¹⁰ Tabari, having considered these meanings, concludes that the most plausible gloss is that given by those people who say that the disciples are called *hawari* because of their white clothes. Tabari also notes that this term became customary to designate a friend or helper as Jesus' apostle/disciple. This opinion is supported by the prophetic tradition.¹¹ Tabari's presentation equips us with two important pieces of information. Firstly, they are true believers and distinguished people. Secondly, he advises us not to disregard the lexical meaning of the word.

Another exegete who deals with the same word is Tusi. Drawing on the account of Hasan he says that the *hawariyyun* are the helpers of Jesus. There are two similar glosses given by Tusi: the *hawariyyun* are the viziers of Jesus; and that they are the chief men of Jesus, *khulasa*. Interestingly, with the exception of a very brief note which says that the *hawari* are *qassarun* (those who whiten their clothes) Tusi does not mention any report about why they are called *hawari*.¹²

Zamakhshari does not define this term and does not hint that he has given more information elsewhere.¹³ Ibn Kathir's opening definition of *hawariyyun* is short and precise. According to him, they are the followers of Jesus, *atba'u 'isa*.¹⁴ He then makes a very interesting point at the beginning of his interpretation of this verse, though it is not related to the word *hawariyyun*. He reminds us that some scholars state that this story is not found in

9 The author of the article on the *hawariyyun* in *EI2* considers it as an erroneous gloss. For him, the word is originally borrowed from the Ethiopian language. (Wensinck, A. J. 'Hawari', *EI2*, III.285).

10 Tabari, VI.449-50.

11 *Ibid.*, VI.450-1.

12 Tusi, Abu Ja'far Muhammad b. al-Hasan (1960) *al-Tibyan fi Tafsir al-Qur'an* (Najaf, al-Maktab al-Qasir) IV.61.

13 Zamakhshari (nd) *al-Kashshaf can Haqa'iq al-Tanzil wa cUyun al-Aqawil fi Wujuh al-Ta'wil* (Beirut, Dar al-Macrifah) I.653.

14 Ibn Kathir (nd) *Tafsir al-Qur'an al-cAzim* (Cairo, Turath Pub) II.116.

the Gospel (not Gospels) and adds 'the Christians do not know anything about the table unless the Muslims tell the story to them.' He closes this preface with the expression 'God knows best'.¹⁵ It is very difficult to know whether Ibn Kathir speaks on the basis of his own research or not, but one thing is clear: that he incorporates this verse into his list of polemics to show that the People of the Book are unaware of their own traditions.

3. The Meaning of *Istata'a*

The situation with regard to the term *istata'a* is somewhat more complicated. Every classical exegete had to grapple with the precise meaning of *hal yastati'u rabbuka* (is your Lord able to...) in 5:112. Once again Tabari examines different readings of the expression: firstly, a group of companions and followers (Tabari does not identify these companions and successors, but almost all post-Tabari commentators mention the names of these people, who prefer the variant *hal tastati'u*) read it *hal tastati'u rabbaka* (accusative). According to this reading the meaning of the verse can be stated as follows: 'Can you (Jesus) ask your Lord (to send down for us a table)?', or 'Can you invoke your Lord and are you able?' or 'See (if it is permitted to you) to invoke your Lord'. Tabari also notes that the companions and followers said that the disciples of Jesus never doubted God's Power to send the table down for them.¹⁶ So the rationale behind this view is to exonerate the disciples from any insincere action. In support of this interpretation Tabari lists two reports. Both reports emphasise that the disciples have a strong belief in God.¹⁷

As regards the other reading of the expression, Tabari says that the majority of the readers of Madina and Iraq read it *hal yastati'u rabbuka* (nominative), which means 'is your Lord able to send down...'. To clarify the matter and reduce any dogmatic unease, Tabari compares this gloss with the ordinary communication of people who might ask their friends to stand by saying 'can you stand?' Although they are perfectly aware of their friends' ability to stand, they get their friends to stand up with them by using such a phrase.

Furthermore, Tabari records an alternative gloss within the confines of the second reading: it is also permissible for a reader to mean 'Does your Lord answer what you want (ask) and does He also accept your request to

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, II.116.

¹⁶ Tabari, XI.218-9.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, XI.219.

send...(or obey *-yuti'uka-* your request to send...?)¹⁸ After this exposition Tabari states that the better of these two readings is *hal yastati'u rabbuka*. The main reason for this preference, according to Tabari, lies in the relation of the two verses (5:111 and 5:112). According to Tabari, this relation is not confined to grammar or lexical affinity; it is directly connected with coherence and theological dogma. On the basis of his rational argument he concludes: 'It is clear that God expresses His dislike of their demand and commands them to repent what they have asked, to return to their previous strong belief in God and his messengers, and to acknowledge that God is able to do everything.' Furthermore, Tabari considers the words of Jesus crucial evidence of God's disapproval; 'fear God, if you are indeed believers.' Stressing the grievous nature of their demand, he reaches the conclusion that the above-mentioned statements clearly indicate the sufficiency and correctness of the reading *hal yastati'u rabbuka*. Obviously, Tabari devotes much energy to solving the problem of variant readings. He first brings together two independent verses to contextualize their meanings, then deals with individual expressions to support his own interpretation.

Tabari goes further and discusses some purely dogmatic explanations. First of all he distinguishes between the demands of Jesus' disciples, who are believers in God and in His messengers, from the demands of unbelievers, who ask their prophets to perform miracles, so that they might believe. At this stage one should consider the exact status of the *ma'idah* together with the definition of 'miracle'. Tabari implies that what the disciples asked for is not a miracle, *mu'jizah*, because miracles are necessary only for unbelievers. The *ma'idah*, according to Tabari, is a *burhan*, *hujjah* (proofs) and *'alamah* (sign), given to increase the knowledge of the disciples. Pursuing his analysis, Tabari says that whoever associates the demand of the disciples with the disbelievers' demand for a miracle by using the variant reading *hal tastati'u rabbaka* is badly mistaken, because by doing so they worsen the situation even more than those who hold that the disciples want Jesus to ask his Lord to send down a table to them even though they believe in Jesus and confirm his prophecy. According to Tabari, the latter group at least assume that they are not charging God with imperfection. Tabari does not name any early authority who espoused this mistaken interpretation but he is still reluctant to give up the discussion. He lays stress on the latter group's interpretation, which apparently simplifies the theological aspect of the verse. What Tabari says is that the disciples'

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, XI.219.

demands are similar to a poor person's request that his prophet should ask God to make him rich. The disciples do not ask Jesus to perform a miracle; they merely ask Jesus to ask his Lord to meet their needs. The conclusion Tabari derives from these verses is clear: the disciples are not certain that Jesus is telling the truth, and their hearts are not entirely satisfied with the reality of his prophecy. In short, there is doubt in their hearts about their religion. Accordingly, they only ask for an *ikhtibar* (test).¹⁹ Obviously, the *ikhtibar* (to seek reality) in the eyes of Tabari has a positive connotation which exonerates the disciples away from any doubt or disbelief.

Tusi states briefly that Kisa'i and A'sha read it with *ta*, *hal tastati'u* and *rabbaka* in the accusative. He also adds that the rest read it with *ya*, *yastati'u* and *rabbuka* in the nominative. Tusi then deals with the meaning of the verse. He lists three interpretations: the first explains that it can be rendered as 'Is your Lord able, *yaqduru*, to do it?' The association of the word *yastati'u* with *yaqduru*, according to Tusi, is as inevitable as it is problematic. In order to remove the theological problem created by this interpretation, Tusi feels obliged to give this additional information: 'they asked for the table at the beginning of their mission.' In other words their request was made before the knowledge of God was established firmly in their hearts. Therefore the prophet denied their suggestion saying '...fear God if you are indeed believers'.²⁰ Here Tusi's presentation is quite objective, however his attempt to save the disciples from deformity by bringing rational argument to the discussion has no Qur'anic basis. Tusi's second comment is the same which is mentioned by Tabari; however, he does not record any authority for it. Then Tusi turns to philosophical analysis to explain this second interpretation: 'because an impediment in respect of motivation or volition may have the same effect as inability.' The disciples did not, therefore, question God's ability, but merely wondered whether He would send the table down or not.²¹

Tusi, in his last interpretation, largely depends on Suddi. 'Does your Lord answer your request or does He obey you if you ask Him?' At first glance the literal meaning of the expression seems unacceptable; however, Tusi is eager to play with the words to show an interrelation among them and allow for the variant *tastati'u*: *istata'a* and *ata'a* have the same meaning as *istijaba* and *ajaba* (*s* is excessive, *za'id*), so the word *istita'a*, 'to be able to', must be

19 *Ibid.*, XI.220-2.

20 Tusi, IV.62.

21 *Li anna al-manci min jihat al-hikmat aw al-shahwati qad yujcalu bi manzilat al-munafi li al-istitaca.*

understood as ‘to obey or to listen to’, ‘does your Lord obey (listen to) you if you ask Him?’ This last opinion was held by Sibawayh.²²

The meaning of Kisa’i’s reading, *hal tastati‘u*, is ‘can you ask your Lord to answer you?’ Moreover, Tusi notes another aspect of the understanding of the verse: ‘are you (Jesus) able, *taqduru*, to ask your Lord?...’²³ Tusi gives a clear linguistic analysis of the several forms of the verb, indicating both possible and probable meanings. He, in contrast to Tabari, does not disregard the variant *tastati‘u*. His logical survey ends with the explanation of the nuance separating *istita‘a* and *qudra*. According to Tusi, God is certainly not described by *istita‘a*²⁴ because His Power never depends on any secondary agency; obviously, *qadir* (Absolute Power) necessitates the ability to do all things without assistance.²⁵

In his comment on 5:112 Zamakhshari raises a very interesting question: ‘How can the disciples say ‘Is your Lord able to send a table...’ after coming to believe in God and purifying themselves from inappropriate acts?’ In response, he points out that God does not characterise or describe them as sincere believers, He only narrates their claim to be sincere believers. The distinction made by Zamakhshari indicates that genuine belief is different from a mere description of oneself as a believer. He tries to solve this theological problem within a Qur’anic context. According to Zamakhshari it is not possible for a real believer, who glorifies his Lord, to ask a question such as ‘Is your Lord able to send a table...’²⁶ Zamakhshari is unique among the classical exegetes in presenting the problem in its starkest form.

Besides this interpretation, Zamakhshari also records another which stems from the variant reading of the verb *yastati‘u*, namely *tastati‘u*: ‘Can you ask your Lord to send a table down...’. Although many commentators mention the same variant, Zamakhshari’s elucidation of it is precise and quite different from their explanation: ‘Can you ask your Lord without any obstacle which prevents you from asking it...’²⁷ Strangely, Zamakhshari uses this variant together with his own interpretation to support his previ-

22 *Ibid.*, IV.62.

23 *Ibid.*, IV.62-3.

24 Interestingly, Qurtubi says that Ibn al-cArabi considered *al-mustaticu* to be a name of God. He also notes that this name is not mentioned in the Qur’an and in the Sunnah of the prophet explicitly (as an *isman*) but it occurs *fi‘lan* (as an action). (Qurtubi, Abu cAbd Allah Muhammad b. Ahmad (1967) *al-Jamic li Ahkam al-Qur’an* (Cairo, Maktaba la-cArabiyyah) VI.365).

25 Tusi., IV.63.

26 Zamakhshari, I.654.

27 *Ibid.*, I.654.

ous explanation. In other words, as regards the meaning there is little difference between these two variants. Furthermore, one may also seek the reason for Zamakhshari's negative interpretation of the disciples' position together with their question in the possibility that his explanation was influenced by the fluctuating relationship between the Islamic states and Christendom.²⁸

Razi devotes a lengthy discussion to the question of whether the disciples have doubts about the Oneness of God and the prophecy of Jesus. The first step taken by Razi is to introduce the reading of the celebrated companions, such as ʿAli, Ibn ʿAbbas, and ʿAisha: *hal tastatiʿu rabbuka*. In addition, Razi records a report from Muʿadh b. Jabal, who said that the messenger of God taught him to read this verse as *hal tastatiʿu rabbaka*.²⁹ Interestingly, Razi's beginning with unofficial reading together with noting Muʿadh b. Jabal's report indicates that he gives this reading to some extent canonical status rather than mentioning it for exegetical purpose.

As regards the rival reading, Razi, without naming any authority, states that others read *hal yastatiʿu rabbuka*. The difference between these two readings is significant. Razi, quoting from unknown personalities, says that according to the first reading, with *t*, Jesus' ability, *istitaʿa*, to ask his Lord is judged, while in the second reading, with *y*, the ability of God Himself is judged. Razi therefore concludes that there is no doubt of the worthiness of the first reading but that the obscurities of the second reading still remain. This being so, the major question confronting Razi is how is it permissible for the disciples to be described as being doubtful about the Power of God, though God narrates that they have believed and have wanted to bear witness to their belief?³⁰ In order to clarify these questions Razi gives a summary of various interpretations. Some of these explanations are original. He begins by stating that God has not described them as sincere believers but has only narrated their claim to having become sincere believers. This distinction, first made by Zamakhshari, indicates that genuine belief is different from one's claiming to be a believer. So it is not possible for the believer who glorifies his Lord to ask 'is your Lord able...'.³¹ Razi quotes this interpretation from Zamakhshari almost verbatim and gives

28 This point has been proposed recently by N. M. El Cheikh in his analysis of the first five verses of surah al-Rum. (Cheikh, N. M. E. (1998) 'Surat al-Rum: A Study of the Exegetical Literature', *Journal of the American Oriental Studies*, 118, 356-364).

29 Razi, *ibid.*, III.694

30 *Ibid.*, III.694

31 *Ibid.*, III.694

precisely the same impression -that the disciples are not very sincere believers- although he does not explicitly prefer it.

In his second explanation, he compares their request to that of the prophet Abraham when he asked God to show him how He gives life to the dead. Like Abraham they want to see proof in order to obtain certainty and increase their belief.³² Razi's appeal to Abraham's argument would have been worthless if the disciples were not sincere in their request. This interpretation is reminiscent of Tusi's explanation of related passages.

The third point is very sophisticated and is also quite controversial. Razi comments 'What is meant by this statement is interrogative, whether it is permissible or not, because God's commandments are based on observing logic and reason. In some instances when no reason is known the action is impossible. Likewise, when the reason is not known the *qudra* (ability) is questionable'.³³ This approach is in line with the Mutazilites' interpretation. Razi continues, 'according to our opinion the statement can be set down as follows:

- i. Did God ordain the action?
- ii. Did God know when it would happen?

If He did not ordain the action and did not know when it would happen, then that is impossible and inexcusable because what cannot be known cannot be done'.³⁴ Clearly, Razi's proposal is not very different from the Mutazilites' opinion, and so it is difficult to evaluate what Razi offers by way of explanation on this point. It seems that Razi and the Mutazilites approach the issues differently but explain them in a similar vein. However, there is one minor point which needs clarification. Razi places stress on action while the Mutazilites emphasise reason (or wisdom).

In his fourth explanation he largely depends on the account of Suddi, who considers the letter *s* in *istita'a* to be *za'id* (grammatically excessive) and renders *istita'a* (ability) as *ta'a* (obey). So the meaning of the verse is 'Does your Lord obey (or listen to) you if you ask him ...?'

In the fifth explanation Razi offers a strange interpretation: it is possible to think that the word *rabb* here refers to the Angel Gabriel. According to Razi it is reasonable to hold this view because of the etymological consideration behind it. Gabriel looks after Jesus, educates him and helps him on several occasions. To support this possibility, Razi cites 5:110 '...O re-

³² *Ibid.*, III.694

³³ Tusi made a similar interpretation but Razi does not refer to him.

³⁴ Razi, III.695

member My Favour to you and to your mother when I supported you with *ruh al-quds* (Holy Spirit, Gabriel) so...'. To put it other way, Jesus has been given great importance by Gabriel; due to his close relation to Gabriel, he is able to send a table to him.³⁵

The final elucidation is intended to show the purity of the disciples. According to this explanation there is no question of their doubt being insincere, but their demand is like the demand of a friend who holds his poor friend's hand and says 'can the governor give him food?'³⁶ It seems Razi has taken the idea from Tabari but illustrates it with a different example. So far he has presented six explanations and the majority of them prove that the disciples are not insincere in their faith. Though he does not explicitly reject the second interpretation he does not prefer it either. In the third explanation he openly rejects the Mutazilites' exegetical assumption in the interpretation of wisdom, however he does not present his own opinion clearly. It is also interesting to note that Razi, while objecting to the Mutazilite view, fails to make any reference to one of the strongest supporters of this interpretation, namely Tusi.

Another point which Razi concentrates on is the last part of 5:112. Certain features of his argument deserve attention. He lists two interpretations. The first explains Jesus' concern for the disciples' specification of the miracle. In other words the disciples not only ask for a miracle; they go further and specify the kind of miracle they want (the heavenly table). This is a very interesting contribution to the exegesis of this verse. According to Razi, the manner of the people should be criticised, not the people themselves or the miracle. This approach represents quite a liberal attitude to the interpretation of Jesus' warning.

Razi, in his second interpretation, solves the controversy within the Qur'anic context by citing two verses from the Qur'an: 'Whoever fears God, He will make a way for him to get out (of every difficulty), 65:3, and 'O you who believe! do your duty to God and fear Him. Seek the means of approach to Him...', 5:35. By quoting these verses Razi argues that if the disciples truly believe in God's ability to send down a table, and fear Him, then their fear becomes the means of achieving what they have asked.³⁷ This seems to imply that the text of the Qur'an necessitates belief in this result. Both interpretations are interesting and original.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, III.695

³⁶ *Ibid.*, III.695

³⁷ *Ibid.*, III.695

Ibn Kathir does not mention either of the traditional interpretations found in Tabari nor does he hint that there may be a theological problem in the reading of the expression *hal yastati'u rabbuka*. He simply states that this is the majority's reading and that others read it as *hal tastati'u rabbaka*, which means 'can you ask your Lord...?'³⁸ Strangely, he prefers to give the meaning of the alternative reading rather than that of the generally accepted one. Suffice it to say that, in spite of some ambiguity, the way in which he deals with the verse suggests that he accepts both readings. His approach is also consistent with his gloss of the word *hawariyyun*.

4. The Request of the Disciples of Jesus

In response to Jesus' warning the disciples are prepared to explain why they asked for the 'heavenly table'. Tabari's elucidation is precise: they made this request in order to know the Power of God for a certainty, *yaqin*^{an.39}

Tusi's first discussion, however, revolves around the meaning of *irada* (wish) in this verse. He presents two opinions: one glosses it as *muhabbah* (we will be happy if we see), others consider it an inward action (belief). In Tusi's opinion, the question put forward by the disciples can be read in this way: 'Our request is for that which we have previously requested; that is, to eat from the table.' This desire was present before the sending down of the table, therefore their desire cannot be described as an action (determinism), *‘azm*. In other words, the meaning of their question is that 'they want to ask owing to some reason they have already mentioned'.⁴⁰ The second point made by Tusi is to make a connection between the disciples' intention and Abraham's reply in 2:260: 'Yes, but I wish to be stronger in faith'. So he concludes that true knowledge can only be achieved by perfect confidence and that further proofs will bring greater knowledge.⁴¹ From Tusi's point of view there is no harm in their request for the *ma'idah*, since they only want to increase their faith.

One of the most striking interpretations given by Zamakhshari relates to 5.113. He maintains that the disciples justify themselves to Jesus by saying either 'We will bear witness to this heavenly table among the Children of Israel, who have not seen this miracle', or 'Because of the heavenly table we will bear witness to the Oneness of God and your prophethood.' Basing his opinion on rational grounds, Zamakhshari thus provides two

38 Ibn Kathir, II.116.

39 Tabari, XI.224.

40 Tusi, IV.64.

41 *Ibid.*, IV.64.

interpretations. It is interesting that he connects the disciples' claim to be sincere believers in 5:112 with their wish to be strong in faith and know that Jesus has indeed told them the truth. Zamakhshari still has some doubt about the sincerity of the disciples and holds that God mentions their claim to be believers but does not endorse the genuineness of their belief. Furthermore, Zamakhshari thinks that Jesus' fulfilling their request and God's sending the table down are the proper proofs to satisfy their demand.⁴²

Commenting on this verse, Razi repeats some earlier points and adds that the disciples' request to see a miracle is not motivated by mere curiosity, but is connected to a number of important issues. He lists four explanations: first, they want to eat from the table due to their hunger; second, although they know the Power of God, when they witness this miracle their certainty increases and their faith becomes stronger than before. The third is similar to the second, and the last is particularly interesting; it probably bears the stamp of Razi himself: 'They say 'All previous miracles have been earthly miracles, *mu'jizah*, but this miracle is heavenly and is greater than others. If we see it we will bear witness to the table, to the people who are not present here, to the Power of God and to your (Jesus') prophethood'.⁴³

Clearly, Razi's interpretation contains two implicit response to the Christians: first of all God is the Powerful One, secondly Jesus is His servant. This is a tacit invitation to reject the divinity of Jesus and to accept the ultimate authority of God. Attention must also be paid to the usage of the word *mu'jizah* when the disciples asked for the heavenly table. In contrast to many classical exegetes (they mainly used the words such as *burhan*, *'alamah*, *dalil* to describe the heavenly table instead of *mu'jizah* to distinguish it from the miracle carried out by the prophets of God to persuade disbelievers) Razi prefers to use this technical term to describe the heavenly table.⁴⁴ For him, this is a clear miracle like Jesus' other miracles or even the most important miracles of him. However, it is safe to note that Razi does not believe that the disciples are disbelievers or the heavenly table is sent down to persuade them.

Ibn Kathir also notes an anonymous comment that the disciples asked for the table because of their need and poverty.⁴⁵ Parallel to this, Ibn Kat-

42 Zamakhshari, I.654.

43 Razi, III.696

44 He says in another place that 'the heavenly table' is an evidence for the Oneness of God and the prophethood of Jesus, *dalalah cala wahdaniyyatika wa nubuwwat-i nabiyika* (Razi, III.696)

45 Ibn Kathir, II.116.

hir paraphrases Jesus' warning as follows: 'Fear God, do not ask for a table. You will perhaps fail to obey if it is a test for you, and become subject to punishment. Trust in God for your sustenance if you are a believer.' Their response to Jesus' warning is 'We wish to eat thereof and to be stronger in faith...'. Ibn Kathir gives a rather similar interpretation: they said 'We will need to eat from it, when we see it coming down as sustenance from heaven. Our hearts will be put at rest and our knowledge and faith in your prophecy will increase.'⁴⁶ Ibn Kathir's elucidation deserves close attention. Obviously, he sees nothing unusual in the disciples' request. On the one hand he accepts that hunger was their major motive; on the other he skilfully minimises the dogmatic effect of the verse. To put it another way, unlike his predecessors he does not make any reference to the result of their request, namely 'the increase of their belief in God', 'knowing God's Power with certainty', or 'the Oneness of God is strongly established in their hearts'. What he does is to introduce Jesus and say that the miracle is a sign from God which indicates Jesus' prophethood. In short, the central question is not how can we know God, His Power and so on, but how can we serve Him, *ʿubudīyyah*. One should not disregard the effort the commentators made by using the verse to clarify the position of Jesus, namely *rasul Allah*, the messenger of God.

5. *The Day of Festival, ʿid, and Sustenance, Rizq*

Having expressed the opinion that this is a report from God and informed the reader that Jesus was persuaded to ask God about his people's request for food from heaven, Tabari mentions the scholars' dispute over the meaning of 'that it may be a feast for us, for the first of us and for the last of us'. According to him, there are two main interpretations: first, the disciples consider this as a festival day which they and their descendants will hold in high respect forever. The second interpretation is traced back to Ibn ʿAbbas, who informs us that all the disciples, from the first to the last among them, eats from the table.⁴⁷

Tabari also cites another interpretation on the authority of unknown personalities whose concerns are limited to a lexicographical explanation: God speaks (here) of an *ʿid*, by which is meant (not a festival, but) a benefit which God grants to us, as well as a *hujjah* (argument) and *burhan* (proof and evidence).⁴⁸ Having explained these different approaches, he

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, II.116.

⁴⁷ Tabari, XI.225.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, XI.225.

explicitly states his preference: 'the best one is the first interpretation because they want a festival day on which to pray and to worship like other people who worship on their special festival days. He rejects the third interpretation with the comment 'The meaning contained in the *kalam Allah* (the Speech of God) is to be interpreted as lying closer to the usual manner of speaking of the one who makes the request, than to something inaccessible and unknown to him.'⁴⁹ Clearly, Tabari considers this day as a festival day which is strongly identified with religious themes. However, the exact nature of the day remains obscure. In the interpretation of the expression 'for the first and the last of us' he favours the comment made by Ibn Jurayj: 'for those of us who are living today and for those who will come after us.' The reason for this selection, according to Tabari, is based on the same linguistic argument he cited for God's Words 'that shall be for us an *'id* (festival)', since the meaning adopted (in each case) is the most commonly used one.⁵⁰

As Tabari did before him, Tusi also states two important interpretations of word *'id*.⁵¹ Although his presentation is shorter than Tabari's it is difficult to distinguish either their explanations or their preferences. What is new in his interpretation is the identification of the day on which the *ma'idah* was sent down: (it is said that) it was sent down on Sunday, *yawm al-ahad*.⁵² We have not discovered any criticism of Tusi regarding this identification. He goes on to make a brief comment on the word *ayah* (sign/ proof): *al-ayah* is strong evidence for the persuasion of the heart of the servants to confirmation and confession of the truth.⁵³ So *ma'idah* is not a miracle for the unbelievers but it is a clear evidence for the believers.

Tusi places particular emphasis on the term *rizq*, which occurs in the last part of the verse. He is quite willing to use this opportunity for theological purposes. In his introduction he simply mentions two meanings of the verse: firstly, 'make it sustenance, *rizq*, for us'. The second is favoured by Jubba'i, who explains the verse as follows: 'Provide us *shukr* (thankfulness) as a sustenance'. So *shukr* becomes *rizq* because there is grace in it, like a property which we possess but have not created. Basing his argument on the expression 'You are the Best of sustainers' Tusi goes on to state that this verse is clear evidence that the *'ibad* (servants) provide sus-

49 *Ibid.*, XI.226.

50 *Ibid.*, XI.226.

51 Tusi, IV.65.

52 *Ibid.*, IV.65.

53 *Ibid.*, IV.65.

tenance for each other, *yarzuqu ba^cduhum ba^cd^{an}*. He contends that it is pointless to say ‘You are the Best of sustainers’ if it is not true. It is also meaningless to say ‘You are the Best of deities’ if there is no other deity. He places stress on similar structures such as the Most Merciful one, *arham al-rahimin* etc.⁵⁴ Besides presenting the Mutazilite view of the nature of *rizq* (i.e. that it is created), he tries to invalidate the Sunni approach using this Qur’anic verse.

Similarly, Zamakhshari provides two opinions: the day on which the table was sent down became a festival day and (it is said that) this day coincided with Sunday, therefore the Christians consider Sunday a festival day. The second interpretation is from unknown personalities and glosses *‘id* as the day of joy and delight.⁵⁵

Razi’s other major concern, like many of his predecessors, regarding this verse is the determination of the meaning of *‘id*. The disciples say ‘We consider this day as a festival day; we ourselves and our successors will honour this day forever.’ He also notes that the table was sent down on Sunday, therefore the Christians consider it a festival day. In fact it is the general consensus that the day about which the verse speaks is Sunday. In his lexicographical explanation of *‘id* he says that this word is a noun which means ‘something which returns to one in a specific time.’ Its past and present form are *‘ada ya‘udu* and the origin of the word is *‘ud*. It is called *‘id* because this day returns every year with renewed joy.⁵⁶

Razi deals with two terms which have demanded clarification within the exegetical tradition concerning this verse. The first of these is *ayah* (sign or proof) while the other is *rizq* (sustenance). His explanation is precise: *ayah* means the proof of God’s Oneness and the truth of Jesus’ prophecy. The meaning of ‘provide us sustenance’ is ‘give us food to eat; You are the Best of sustainers.’ This brief comment is used by him as a springboard for his next step, in which he advances more rational arguments. In order to show the consistency between the verses and the order of the words in the verse he gives an elaborate explanation. It is also interesting to note that for the first time in the section examined here we find Razi exhibiting a type of mystical tendency. In addition some of his interpretation contains a strong element of religious piety and he often adopts a hortatory style. In order not to lose any detail of Razi’s message we give here a full translation of his second *mas’ala*

54 *Ibid.*, IV.65.

55 Zamakhshari, I.655.

56 *Ibid.*, III.696

Reflect on the order of the phrases used by the disciples in asking for the table. They first mentioned worldly affairs (their wish to eat from this table) and only later came to the religious purposes. As regards Jesus, when he asked for the table, 'provide us sustenance', he first stated the religious purposes and postponed the worldly aims (to eat etc.). At this stage the rank of souls, *darajat al-arwah*, appeared to you: some of the souls were spiritual, others corporeal, *jismani*. When Jesus (Peace be upon him), being religiously pure and spiritually radiant, mentioned sustenance he did not stop there but transferred from sustenance to Sustainer. His specific citation of the name of the Lord using the word *rabbana* (O our Lord) at the beginning and his request for the table, 'send us a table...', pointed out the transfer from *dhat* (essence) to *sifat* (attribute). The verse '...there may be for us -for the first of us and the last of us- a festival day...' showed the joy of the soul in grace. This grace should not be understood in the sense of its mere being *ni'mah* (grace) but of its being given by *mun'im* (Sustainer). The expression *ayatun minka* referred to the fact that this table was a proof for the man of wisdom. 'Provide us sustenance' signified the portion of the soul, *hissat al-nafs*. All came from Glorious God. Look how it was presented: He began with the noblest one and came down to the lower and lower, then ended with 'You are the Best of sustainers'. This last phrase indicated another ascent from the creatures to the Creator. Now it appeared to you how the pure and bright souls ascended and descended; 'O my Lord, make us one of them.'⁵⁷

Placing particular emphasis on the term *rizq*, Razi implicitly responds to Shi'ite commentator Tusi who held the view that the *'ibad* (servants) provide *rizq* (sustenance) for each other, *yarzuqu ba'duhum ba'dan*.⁵⁸ Clearly he is ready to use every opportunity for theological purposes.

Ibn Kathir lists five reports. With one exception, they are all traced back to earlier authorities: this day is a festival day, and it is also an *'izah* (exhortation) for them and those who come after them, and finally the anonymous report elucidates it as 'enough for the first and the last of us.'⁵⁹ It is also worth noting that Ibn Kathir describes the table as a sustenance, *rizq*,⁶⁰ without engaging in any polemic. The reason for this unqualified statement is clear: he is trying to say that this food is sustenance from God, and only God gives sustenance.

57 *Ibid.*, III.696-7

58 Tusi, Abu Jacfar Muhammad b. al-Hasan al-, *al-Tibyan fi Tafsir al-Qur'an*, Najaf: al-Maktab al-Qasir 1379/1971IV.65

59 Ibn Kathir, II.116.

60 *Ibid.*, II.116.

6. *The Sending Down and Contents of the Table*

The issues that preoccupy virtually all of the commentators on 5:115 are whether the table was sent or not and the precise specification of its contents. Tabari's treatment of the issues is much more extensive than any of his interpretations of the related verses. That he devotes nearly six pages to its interpretation is a fair indication of its importance. Tabari records twenty-three reports; nineteen of them accept that God actually sent the table and four of them hold the opposite opinion. With the exception of a few, most of the reports originates from earlier authorities. There are many important affinities among the reports but there are also many additional individual details.

According to the majority, their food consisted of bread and fish. Some reports go further and say that there was every kind of food on the table. The report which is narrated on the authority of Ishaq b. 'Abd Allah notes the number of fishes and loaves, namely seven. Two reports from 'Ammar and Qatada explicitly record that they were food of paradise, *thamar al-jannah*.

After some speculation on the contents of the table, Tabari turns to the question of what happened to the table after it had been sent down. One report from Simak b. Harb is worth mentioning since it relates what happened to the disciples after the descent of the heavenly table: '... 'Ammar asked a man what he knew about the heavenly table. In response, he stated his lack of knowledge about it. Then 'Ammar told him that the disciples asked Jesus for food which they might eat forever. They were told that as long as they did not conceal any of the food they would continue to be given it, but if they concealed anything they would be punished severely. Unfortunately, they hid something from the table the very day on which it was sent, and consequently the table was lifted up.' After this narrative 'Ammar turned towards the Arabs and addressed them: 'O community of Arabs, you have been following the tails of camels and sheep. God sent you a prophet from among yourselves, and you knew his position and genealogy; he warned you not to store treasures of gold and silver, but before the end of the day you began storing them.'⁶¹ This report emphasises that the followers' behaviour is the reason for God's taking the table away from them. There are also others which point out the same reason, but none connects the attitude of people towards the table with the attitu-

61 Tabari, XI.228.

de of the Arabs of the Hijaz. Interestingly, a similar report from ʿAmmar explains that owing to their putting the miraculous food in store God turned them into apes and pigs.⁶² It is fair to assume that the diversity of the suggestions may indicate the absence of reliable reports on the matter. It is also very difficult to decide whether or not the story contains a historical kernel.⁶³

Those authorities (Hasan and Mujahid) who hold an alternative opinion concentrate on the allegorical, *mathalu darb*, aspect of the verses. According to them, when the disciples were threatened with severe punishment, in 5:115, they sought to be freed from their responsibility; briefly, they changed their minds and no longer asked for the table.⁶⁴ Tabari, however, rejects this approach on the basis of *hadith* literature and the opinion of the many knowledgeable authorities who narrate it. In addition, God recounts this narrative in His Book explicitly and it is an undeniable fact that He never breaks His promise and there cannot be any contradiction in what He announces. God proclaims in the Qur'an 'I will send it down to you...'; this is clear evidence of God's promise. Tabari suggests that if it is not to be taken literally then the verse which deals with the threat of punishment should not be taken literally either. It is not in the nature of God to make a promise and not to fulfil it.⁶⁵

After mentioning many reports that seek to describe the various delicacies the table may have held, Tabari firmly states: 'As for the correct view about what was on the table, it is said to be something to eat. Maybe it was fish or bread, maybe it was fruit from paradise. There is no advantage in knowing what it was; neither is there any harm if one does not know, so long as the conclusions drawn from the verse correspond with the external wording of the revelation.'⁶⁶ Tabari's point is very important. In making this statement, he politely criticises all the reports which provide tedious and unnecessary detail. This, and previous examples, indicate that he is not passive in his narration of the reports. He lists various reports which he then invalidates in his concluding remarks. The verse also affirms, ac-

62 *Ibid.*, XI.229.

63 Although Muslim commentators see no connection, one might find a possible link between these reports and verse 3:49 'And will make him (Jesus) a messenger unto the Children of Israel, (saying): Lo! I come unto you with a sign from your Lord. Lo! I fashion for you out of clay the likeness of a bird and I breath...I inform you too of what you eat, and what you store up in your houses...?'

64 Tabari, XI.231.

65 *Ibid.*, XI.232.

66 *Ibid.*, XI.232.

According to Tabari, that the disciples did indeed eat this food. Furthermore, the expression ‘but if any of you after that disbelieves, then I will punish him...’ indicates that some of them did not believe the miracle and denied the prophecy of Jesus and the Oneness of God.

To explain the nature of this severe punishment Tabari says that one account states that the disbelievers metamorphosed into apes and pigs. In support of this comment he cites a report from Qatada.⁶⁷ Pursuing the matter, Tabari attempts to show how severely they were punished. He lists three reports, two of them from ‘Abd Allah Ibn ‘Amr and one from Suddi. According to the first report the people who will be punished severely are classified as follows: the hypocrites, the people who refused to believe in the *ma’idah*, and the family (relatives) of Pharaoh. The second report is a different version of the first, but the order is changed and the first place is given to the disbelievers in the *ma’idah*.⁶⁸ The last report places great stress on the severity of the punishment of the people who did not believe in the *ma’idah*. In his recitation of the verse *fa inni u‘adhdhibuhu ‘adhaban*... Tabari adds the expression *ghayr ahl al-ma’idah*, meaning that apart from the disbelievers in the *ma’idah* nobody was punished severely. Curiously, at the beginning of his interpretation of the verse Tabari explicitly states that God punished them with a torment which He did not inflict on any other person among all those alive at that time, ‘*alami zamanihi*. The reason for this interpretation is at first glance not very clear; however, it is safe to assume that Tabari has in mind the Qur’anic punishment of Pharaoh’s people, 40:46, and of the hypocrites, 4:145.⁶⁹ In order to reconcile these two different warnings concerning the punishment, he feels obliged to record this condition, ‘*alami zamanihi*.

In his treatment of the contents of the table Tusi skilfully summarises Tabari’s lengthy reports into three basic interpretations: ‘the table contained bread and fish and they found the smell of every kind of food in the fish; the food was the food of paradise, with the exception of meat there was every kind of food on it.’⁷⁰ The obvious decrease in the amount of the reports in Tusi’s presentation is clear evidence of his attitude towards un-

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, XI.232.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, XI.233.

⁶⁹ 40:46, ‘They are exposed to the fire, morning and afternoon, and on the Day when the Hour will be established (it will be said to the angels): ‘Cause Pharaoh’s people to enter the severest torment!’.

4:145, ‘Verily, the hypocrites will be in the lowest depths of the fire; no helper will you find for them’.

⁷⁰ Tusi, IV.65.

necessary detail; however, he does not explicitly make any negative remark against this clarification.

As his next step Tusi, like Tabari, explains the punishment by offering three interpretations: firstly, the disbelievers metamorphosed into apes and pigs; secondly, only the leaders of that time were subjected to the punishment which the Qur'anic verse describes. The third explanation does not identify any specific punishment or group to be punished. It is concerned with a more general interpretation and is close to the Qur'anic narrative. The significance of the punishment, according to this interpretation, is that it was a kind of punishment which had never been imposed before, because the guilty ones, having seen the proof, nonetheless denied it and for their denial they deserved this unique punishment.⁷¹

Tusi tries to clarify the logic or wisdom which necessitates this punishment: it is just 'because they were warned before'. But he also mentions an alternative opinion: 'the *ma'idah* was not sent down.' Having rejected this opinion, he notes the consensus of the people of knowledge, *ahl 'ilm*, who say that the table was definitely sent down. He depends heavily on reports narrated on the authority of Ammar b. Yasir and others. He also cites the Qur'anic expression 'I send it...' as conclusive evidence. It is worth mentioning that Tusi's brief elucidation is derived from Tabari's speculative interpretation, though he does not give the reader as much choice as Tabari. It is also interesting to note that both exegetes leave the identification of the people who deserved to be punished unclear: are they the disciples, other believers, or the Jewish community?

Zamakhshari gives a number of details about the table. His presentation is interesting enough to merit quotation in its entirety. 'It is narrated that when Jesus wanted to pray he put on a woollen garment and said 'O my Lord, send down a table'. Then while the people were looking at the sky the table descended between two clouds. There was a red cloth on the table. When Jesus saw the table he wept and said

O my Lord, place me among the people who acknowledge their thankfulness to You; make the table a blessing for us, not a punishment.' He then turned to his people and told them 'Let the best of you stand, uncover the table, mention the name of God and then eat from it'. In response to Jesus, Simon, the head of the disciples, said, 'You are the best of us, you should do it'. Jesus stood up, performed ablution, prayed and wept. Then

71 *Ibid.*, IV.66.

he removed the cloth covering the table and mentioned the name of God who was the Best of the sustainers.⁷²

After this introduction Zamakhshari presents still more elaborate information about the contents of the table:

...it was a roasted fish without scales or bones; on the head of the fish there was salt and on its tail there was vinegar, and around the vinegar there was every kind of vegetable except dates. There were also five cakes and upon each of them there were respectively olives, honey, butter, cheese and meat cut in slices and dried in the sun. Simon asked Jesus about the origin of these foods, whether they were from this world or the hereafter. In reply Jesus told them that they were from neither place; God had created, *ikhṭarāʿa*, them with His Glorious Power; and he said to them, 'Eat what you want to eat, and thank God because of His great Blessing upon you.' Then the disciples said, 'O Spirit of God, is it possible to show us another miracle (proof) from this miracle (table) which you have already performed.' Jesus suddenly addressed the fish: 'Be alive with the permission of God.' After Jesus' command this fish started to move; then Jesus told it to return to the table. The fish became a roasted fish again and returned to the table. Even after having seen these miracles some of the people disbelieved and so they were changed into apes and pigs.⁷³

The description of the table occupies a substantial place in the interpretation of this verse, and Zamakhshari never questions the authenticity of this narrative. His explanation ends with the interpretation of Hasan; 'when the disciples were threatened with severe punishment they said that in that case they did not want the heavenly table, so it was not sent down. Had it been sent, however, it would have become associated with a festival day celebrated by the people until the Day of Judgement.'⁷⁴

Razi, in his opening phrase, states that there are a number of issues involved in the interpretation of this verse. He offers six points for discussion; moreover, he subdivides some of these points. In his second *mas'ala* centres on the identification of the punishment of those who did not believe the miracle. Razi, quoting from Ibn ʿAbbas, says that they metamorphosed into pigs. Besides this report he cites others from anonymous authorities: 'It is said that God has punished them with a specific torment which He has not inflicted on anyone before.' This interpretation is given

72 Zamakhshari, I.655.

73 *Ibid.*, I.655.

74 *Ibid.*, I.655.

on the authority of Zajjaj, who offers two alternatives: either they have been punished in this life or they are going to be punished hereafter.

The third *mas'ala* deals with an uncommon interpretation of the verse. Razi again narrates on the authority of unidentified individuals: 'It is said that they asked for the table while they were in the desert without water and food.' This comment indicates that the disciples' request was motivated by a need for food. Theologically speaking there is no harm in their request.

In *mas'ala* four, Razi raises another dogmatic issue: 'It is not certain whether Jesus requested the table for himself or for the people.' According to him, 'both are possible, although Jesus apparently asks for the table for himself, God knows best'.⁷⁵ As far as the Qur'anic verse is concerned, the request for the table is attributed to the plural (the people), and for this reason Razi's comment regarding Jesus' requesting the table for himself is not very clear.

The fifth *mas'ala* notes some dispute over the question of whether the table was sent down or not. According to Mujahid and Hasan the table was not sent down. In justification they offer two interpretations: when the people heard of the severe punishment of God they decided that they did not want the table to be sent down. The second comment relies on the Qur'anic account 'there may be for us -for the first and the last of us- a festival and sign from You'. This verse explains that although this day will remain a festival until the Day of Judgement, today is not a festival day. At this point, Razi first mentions the consensus of the majority, who hold that the table was sent down. The reason for this conclusion is the Qur'anic verse 'I will send it down...'. God never breaks His promises. Razi himself provides two explanations in response to these two alternative interpretations. First he says that there is no connection between 5:115, '...any of you who after that disbelieves, I will punish him...' and 5:115, 'I am going to send it down unto you...'. However, there is an internal connection between 'whoever disbelieves...' and 'I will punish...'. Secondly this festival is still observed by the followers of Jesus.⁷⁶ By providing this information Razi accepts that this custom is still valid and is content with the identification of Sunday as a festival day. This comment implicitly authenticates the reports which support this identification. This approach suggests that Razi is aware of Sunday service in the Church, however his pre-

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, III.697

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, III.697

sensation has some ambiguity. It is not clear what does he mean by the festival day; is it a feast, is it a sacrifice day, or just social gathering. Obviously, like many exegetes Razi's knowledge about his Christian neighbours is very limited. In the last *mas'ala* Razi mentions a long narration which is identical to Zamakhshari's above-mentioned presentation.

Razi's explanation of the episode ends with this long narrative. In order to appreciate Razi's approach analysed in this article, we shall review some of his major points. He discusses several topics and brings a myriad of arguments to support his interpretations. Various rationales lie behind his subdivided arguments, however sometimes it is difficult to evaluate them within the confines of a single topic. This analysis has shown us that Razi often interprets the Qur'an in the light of the Qur'an to justify his views on the grounds of coherence. One of the most important points on which Razi puts weight is his frequent appeal to the rational argument. It is difficult to know why he establishes his many remarks on rational grounds, however one should not disregard the possibilities that the absence of the reports, his desperate need to polemical discussion and love of philosophy force him to use rational arguments. For instance, in the interpretation of 5:114 he provides semi-mystical and semi-philosophical explanation to reject the Mutezilites' view about the understanding of *rizq*. It is also worth noting that he sometimes identifies his opponents but sometimes does not. However, it is not difficult to find out to whom he is addressing.

Regarding the exegetical reports it can be said that there is a significant decrease in the quantity of the reports in Razi's commentary. A strongly rationalist approach leads him to eliminate many of the reports passed on by tradition. However, it does not mean that he does not use these reports in his commentary at all. He, for example, recounts stories about Jesus' request 'the heavenly table' in great detail without bringing any apparent criticism. He also does not criticise any report concerning the punishment of the unbelievers in 'the heavenly table.'

Ibn Kathir devotes half a page to an interpretation of 5:112-115. In his explanations, as has been shown above, he is very selective; and in the first section there are no details, alternative opinions or glosses. However, he gives many details in the second section of his interpretation, under the heading 'the citation of the reports related from *salaf* about the table sent down to the disciples'. In contrast to his reticence in the previous section he is very generous in his presentation of a number of reports, recording even minute details. The section contains twenty-three reports, the majority of which are traced back to earlier authorities. It should be mentioned

that he is largely dependent on Tabari in his presentation of the reports, the main difference between the two exegetes being confined to their content. Some of Ibn Kathir's reports are quite long and add considerable detail. He begins his narration with Ibn 'Abbas' report, which deals with the reason for the disciples' request for the heavenly table. According to this report Jesus told the Children of Israel to fast for thirty days and asked God to give them whatever they wanted after this period, because workers' salaries should be paid by the person who employs them. Having fasted for thirty days they came to Jesus and told him what they had done, reminding him of what he had said about their reward. They added 'We never worked for anyone for thirty days without being given food when we finished the work, so is your Lord able to send us a table from heaven?'⁷⁷ The report ends with the citation of Qur'anic verses.

After this opening report Ibn Kathir records seven more which explain that the food consisted of bread and fish. Four out of the seven specifically mention the number of fishes and loaves, namely seven. Two reports explicitly state that they are food of paradise. Furthermore, in his report Wahb b. Munabbih says that God sent it daily, and on each occasion four thousand people ate from it. In order to explain what happened to these people, Ibn Kathir mentions 'Ammar's speech, which is also found in Tabari.⁷⁸ Although this narrative, which describes the people's concealing or stealing food from the table, is not unique, it is clear that it is the longest of the narratives discussing their attitude. Two reports, from Sa'id b. Jubayr and Zadhan-Maysara, exclude meat from the contents of the table, while Ikrima's report specifically mentions that the bread was made of cedar flour.⁷⁹

The longest report presented by Ibn Kathir is related on the authority of Salman al-Khayr. The short version of this report is mentioned by Zamakhshari, who however does not record any authority for this report. Also he devotes less than half a page to the report while Ibn Kathir devotes one and half pages. The story begins with Jesus' warning the people 'be content with what God provides you on earth...'. He reminds them of the punishment of Thamud and tries to persuade them not to ask for the table. Although he fails to convince them, he never neglects to pray on their behalf.⁸⁰ Ibn Kathir goes on to provide details about Jesus' prayer.

⁷⁷ Ibn Kathir, II.116.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, II.117.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, II.117.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, II.117.

He first performed both ablutions, then he went to the place where he prayed, turned towards the *qibla*, straightened his feet, placed his anklebones together, put his feet side by side, put his right hand on his left hand over his chest, closed his eyes and in his sincerity he bowed his head. Then he wept. His tears came down his cheeks and through his beard; the tears of Jesus wet the earth, whose surface swelled and rose until it was level with his face. When he saw this he prayed, 'O God, send down a table spread for us...'⁸¹

Unlike the accounts in Zamakhshari, the motive for weeping here is clearly stated, and the specification of minute actions goes far beyond Zamakhshari's laconic form. It is also evident that Ibn Kathir is drawing an image of an ideal man who prays in a perfect manner. His description fits the exact nature of prescribed prayer in Islam. The rising of the earth caused by Jesus' tears has some legendary features. It is very difficult to determine whether Ibn Kathir is narrating these details from different sources or is himself placing them within the context of the story.

The narrative continues by giving information about the table, Jesus' and the people's position, and what happened after the table came down. Ibn Kathir's description of the table's descent and Jesus' reaction to it is similar to the presentations of Zamakhshari, though Ibn Kathir provides more minor details. Two additions and one difference may be immediately observed in Ibn Kathir's narrative. The first addition concerns a very pleasant odour that the people around the table smelled, while the second concerns the Jews' attitude towards the miracle. According to this report, when the Jews saw the table they went away, feeling resentment at the miracle. As regards the difference, Ibn Kathir identifies the people who asked Jesus to uncover the cloth from the table with the disciples, while Zamakhshari mentions only Simon, the head of the disciples.⁸²

The middle section of the story deals with the description of the fish on the table. Although some points are the same there are also some differences. Ibn Kathir narrates that when Jesus commanded the fish to become a snake it suddenly became a snake which licked its lips with its tongue and its eyes became like a lion's eyes... seeing that his followers were scared by this, Jesus ordered the snake to become a roasted fish and it did so.⁸³ The answer to the question of who ate first is similar in all three exegetes, but their style is quite different. Ibn Kathir's presentation is very close to the

81 *Ibid.*, II.117.

82 *Ibid.*, II.118.

83 *Ibid.*, II.118.

hortatory style. Moreover, he draws attention to this religious observance to make the reader aware of Islamic *adab* (politeness).

One of the interesting aspects of Ibn Kathir's narrative is his record that 1300 people ate this food and that whoever ate became rich if he was poor, healthy if he was sick and so on, and that when they stopped eating, the table was exactly the same as when it first came down; nothing on it had increased or decreased. It is also pointed out that when the disciples saw that Jesus himself did not eat they kept away from the table. Later they regretted not having partaken of the miraculous food.⁸⁴

As regards the timing of the appearance of the table, he says that the table's descents and ascents continued for forty days; it came as the sun rose and in the evening it was taken away by the permission of God. The people saw its shadow as it was taken away. The long report ends with another narrative. God commanded Jesus to confine His sustenance to the poor and orphans. When the rich people heard God's command they started disseminating doubt among the people. When they questioned the nature of the table Jesus warned them, saying 'You have asked for this miracle and now you are doubtful about it...'. The next day God punished the unbelievers by changing them into apes and pigs. At the end of this report Ibn Kathir comments 'This is a *gharib* report segmented by Ibn Abi Hatim but I have compiled it in one sequential form to make it more consistent and eloquent, God knows best.' Although he dutifully mentions these reports and adds a sceptical 'God knows best' to indicate his own doubt as to their credibility, he does to some extent consider the reports as proof of the contents and the actual sending of the table and accepts the literal meaning of the Qur'anic expression '...I will send it down to you...'.⁸⁵

After presenting this long narrative Ibn Kathir cites an alternative view: the table was not sent down. It seems that his information about the source of this opinion derives directly from Tabari. Ibn Kathir authenticates the *isnad* of these reports and he also admits that the absence of the story in the Gospel (sic) strengthens the correctness of this opinion (that the table was not sent down). If it had been sent, an account would be found in the Christians' books or even as an *ahad* report in their tradition.⁸⁶ It may be because of the absence of this episode in the Gospel that he adopts a polemical approach at the beginning of his analysis. Here, however, we are witnessing his apologetic use of the Gospel in order to support his expla-

84 *Ibid.*, II.118.

85 *Ibid.*, II.119.

86 *Ibid.*, II.119

nation. Also, it should be noted that, such a dualism in Ibn Kathir's presentation occurs from time to time.

In spite of the fact that he gives some importance to the second interpretation it is not safe to conclude that he favours this comment. Bearing in mind the authentic transmission of the second opinion, he avoids rejecting these reports, but feels obliged to provide some intellectual argument. The reason for Ibn Kathir's implicit duality regarding these reports lies in his sincere desire to accept the opinion of the majority of *salaf* (predecessors). It is worth mentioning that having stated the majority's opinion he notes that historians record that Musa b. Nusayr found Solomon the son of David's table decorated with precious stones in Andalus. The table was sent back to the caliph in Damascus and the people came and looked at it in astonishment.⁸⁷

Finally, Ibn Kathir ends this section with the report narrated by Ahmad b. Hanbal on the authority of Ibn ʿAbbas, who says that the Quraysh asked the prophet to pray to God to convert the mountain *safa* into gold. They added 'If you do this we will believe you.' In reply the prophet asked 'Would you become Muslims?' They said 'yes'; then he prayed. The Angel Gabriel came, gave him the Lord's greeting and suggested two alternatives: 'if you wish mount *safa* will become gold and then whoever denies will be punished severely' and 'if you wish I (the Lord) will open the door of repentance and mercy for them.' The prophet preferred the second one.⁸⁸ This is another aspect of Ibn Kathir's explanation: in order to link the interpretation of the verse with the Muslim community he introduces more recent material to show the relevance of the verses. Interestingly, most of the details Ibn Kathir provides are already mentioned in various commentaries, but he recounts these reports in even greater detail in order to place the reader within the frame of a complete tale, and so it is fair to conclude that Ibn Kathir's story is the most interesting and, we suggest, the most sophisticated of the six accounts. He is also professedly the narrator, and this in itself adds an extra dimension to this narrative.

Conclusion

On many points the classical exegetes bring forward similar arguments to support their interpretations. Tabari and Ibn Kathir rely on the reports extensively; however Tabari is more critical than Ibn Kathir. Tusi and, fol-

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, II.119

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, II.119

lowing him, Zamakhshari and Razi use more rational arguments than the others. Despite their rationality, however, they sometimes narrate weak reports including legendary materials at length. At this juncture, we should exclude Razi and Ibn Kathir. Especially Razi puts great weight is the prophets' immunity from sin. A strongly rationalist element in his thought leads him to formulate intellectual criteria by which to assess the validity of information passed on by tradition. This attitude underlies his intellectual defence of the sinlessness of the prophets. In addition, many of his semi-mystical, semi-philosophical explanation is his determination to reject the Mutazilites' view about the understanding of some controversial issues such as the notion of *rizq*.

The analysis of the heavenly table episode has shown that the classical exegetes retain many obscurities in their presentation. The issues of the belief/unbelief, God's Power, the status of the heavenly table or the miracle of the heavenly table, the relation between the miracle and the punishment, and so forth need further clarification. Although their explanations hint at several meanings they do not openly express their views. The heavenly table is proof of the Oneness of God and Jesus' prophethood. This approach on the one hand contains a tacit response to the doctrine of the Trinity, on the other hand it minimises the role of Jesus in the fulfilling of the disciples' request. In other words, God created, *ibtada'a/ ikhtara'a*, the table from nothing. It is not a miracle in the sense that God violates the laws of nature to persuade the ungodly; it is a proof to increase the faith of the believers. In addition, some of the exegetes see the table as a source of food created to fulfill the needs of individuals.