Resurrection, revelation and reason: Husayn al-Jisr (d. 1909) and Islamic eschatology

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Resurrection, Revelation and Reason
Husayn Al-Jisr (d. 1909) and Islamic Eschatology

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When, during the second half of the nineteenth century, members of the intellectual elite in the Islamic world became familiar with the findings of modern science, men of religion began to tackle the problem of how to relate these findings to the religious truths founded on revelation. The Indian Muslim Sayyid Ahmad Khan (1817–1898) was the first one to occupy himself with this problem. He advocated a form of Islam that was in agreement with the modern natural sciences and that had assimilated many ideas and values that were current in the West at that time. In the Middle East, the Egyptian reformer Muhammad 'Abduh (1849–1905) worked in the same vein. He intended to interpret Islam in such a manner that it would not be an obstacle to modernization. Like Sayyid Ahmad Khan he posited that there could be no contradiction between revelation and nature. He expressed this notion as follows: “God has sent down two books: one created, which is nature, and one revealed, which is the Kor'an.” These books cannot contradict one another. If there is an apparent contradiction, then the Koran must be interpreted metaphorically (ta'wil) so as to make it agree with the findings of natural science.  

In this intellectual tradition the Syrian scholar Husayn al-Jisr (1845–1909) had his place. Although he is now almost forgotten, he enjoyed great popularity during his lifetime and for some time after his death. One of the reasons for his popularity was that in his writings he dealt with the findings of modern science. In this essay I will examine why and to what extent he made use of natural phenomena and rational explanations in his theological discourse, and I

2 al-Manar, vii, 292, as translated and quoted by C. C. Adams, Islam and Modernism in Egypt (New York 1933), 136.
5 As late as in the 1940s, some of his books were popular in Indonesia. See Tahir al-Djaza'iri, De edelgesteenten der geloofseer. Uit het Ar. vert. en van een inl. en aant. voorzien door G.F. Pijper (Leiden, Brill 1948) XIV–XV.
will focus on his views on eschatology, as this is pre-eminent in the domain of metaphysical speculation based on revealed texts.

Husayn ibn Muhammad al-Jisr al-Tarabulusi was born in Tripoli (now in Lebanon), where he lived most of his life and died. Between 1865 to 1872 he studied at al-Azhar University in Cairo. In this period he developed an interest in modern science and began to study it on his own. Back in his homeland he became a teacher of religion and taught at several schools in Beirut and Tripoli. In 1886 he published al-Risâla al-Hamidiyya fi haqiqat al-diyana al-islamiyya wa-haqqiyat al-shari'ah al-Muhammadiyya (The Hamidian Treatise on the Truth of the Islamic Religion and the Verity of Mohammed’s Law). This book, which was translated into Turkish three years later, won him fame and the reputation of an Islamic scholar abreast of his times. Sultan Abdulhamid II (1876–1909), in pursuance of his policy of patronizing Islamic scholars and most probably flattered by the dedication of the book to him, rewarded the author with decorations and money. In 1891 he invited the author to Istanbul and offered him a stipend to write a second book to defend Islam and refute the objections raised by the materialists. The book was published in 1905 in Cairo under the title Al-husūn al-hamidiyya li-muḥāfażat al-aqā'id al-islāmiyya (The Hamidian Strongholds for Defending the Islamic Doctrines). He stayed in Istanbul nearly one year. After his return to Tripoli he founded a magazine called Jaridat Tarābulusī. He died in 1909.

In both the Risâla and the Husūn the relationship between religion and the findings of modern science plays a role. The difference between the two books, however, is their point of departure. In the Risâla al-Jisr addresses in a polemical way the “materialists” (al-maddîyyûn, or al-tabî'îyyûn al-maddîyyûn al-dahriyyûn), i.e., in his definition, those who only recognize truth if it is based on sensory perception and reason. Obviously, the intended readership are the modernized Muslims who have acquired some familiarity with Western science. They form, so to speak, the audience listening to the debate between al-Jisr and the materialists, and it is them whom al-Jisr wants to convince. The book focuses on natural phenomena and scientific theories, and the author tries to demonstrate that the findings of modern science, to the extent that they are proven beyond doubt, which, he claims, is often not the case, are not contrary to the principles of Islam and, conversely, that the basic tenets of Islam are not contrary to modern science. In the Husūn al-Jisr addresses Muslims whose faith has become weakened by having become acquainted with the natural sciences through the press. The book deals chiefly with the established Islamic beliefs, and the author tries to refute the doubts that have arisen amongst them and to demonstrate that the dogmas and notions of Islam are not in conflict with modern science and that they can be explained rationally.

His rational demonstration of Islamic dogmatics starts from the belief in God’s existence and often his argumentation is rather self-evident, resting mainly on the acceptance of God’s omnipotence. In this way he defends the belief in Mohammed’s Nocturnal Journey and Ascension (al-Isrâ’ wa-l-Mi’râj). According to the established interpretation of the verse “Glory be to Him, who carried His servant by night from the Holy Mosque to the Further Mosque...” (K. 17:1), supported by numerous Traditions, Mohammed travelled one night, riding a horse called al-Burâq, from Mecca to Jerusalem, ascended to heaven and returned to Mecca. Al-Jisr explains that it is rationally possible that bodies move with enormous velocity and that, therefore, it is also rationally possible that God moves the Prophet with such a speed as needed to accomplish the aforementioned journey. Similarly, in explaining the miracle (mu’jiza) performed by Moses (Mûsâ), when he struck a rock with his stick and the rock produced water, al-Jisr points out that God can create water ex nihilo or transform air into water. The latter feat is in accordance with the laws of nature and can be performed even by man, since “this year” scientists for the first time have liquefied air.

With regard to eschatology, al-Jisr closely follows the traditional doctrine found, with small variations, in the major works of theology. This doctrine divides the Afterlife in two stages: an individual one, namely the time between one’s death and the Hour or Day of Resurrection, and a collective one, the time after the resurrection of the body.

The first stage begins with death, i.e. when the soul (ruh) leaves the body. Every human being has a soul, and it is God’s custom that as long as the soul is in the body, one is alive and that one dies as soon as the soul has left it. It is the soul through which one perceives and understands, and through which one experiences pain and pleasure. When a person’s appointed time has come, the angel ‘Azrâ’il takes away his soul, which leaves the body through the mouth. As soon as the dead person has been buried, God restores to him his soul and, therefore, his senses and his reason, but only to the extent that he is able to understand words

9 Husūn, 114-115.
10 K. 2:60: “And when Moses sought water for his people, so We said, ‘Strike with thy staff the rock’; and there gushed forth from it twelve wells; (;)”.
11 Husūn, 41-42.
12 Husūn, pp. 86-89; For the traditional notions, see: Jane Idleman Smith and Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad, The Islamic Understanding of Death and Resurrection (Albany, State University of New York Press 1981); Ragnar Eklund, Life between Death and Resurrection according to Islam (Uppsala 1941); Hermann Stiegler, Die Glaubenslehren des Islam (Paderborn, Ferdinand Schöningh 1962) 730-808; D. S. Attema, De Mohammedaansche opvattingen omtrent het tijdstip van den Jongsten Dag en zijn voortekenen, Diss. Universiteit van Amsterdam (Amsterdam 1942); Ramadan b. Muhammad, Ḥāthiya ‘alād sharīk al-Tıftağīnī ‘alād al-‘Aqīl id li-l-Naṣṣīf (Istanbul 1315 H.), 221-238; Ibrahim al-Bayjuni, Taḥfuz al-murid ‘alād jawharat al-tawhid li-Ibrahim al-Luqqānī (Cairo, Mustafa al-Bābī al-Halabī 1939) 99-118.
spoken to him, to reply to them, and to feel pain and pleasure. In his grave, a dead person will be roughly interrogated by two angels in order to make his faith and his deeds known to them. Accordingly, he will be punished and made to suffer pain or be rewarded and made to experience pleasure. The pain and pleasure will last until the Day of Resurrection, except that for some sinners the punishment may stop earlier. One of the conditions of the grave is that it squeezes the dead person as the sides draw nearer to each other.

The coming of the second stage, the period after the Hour that will last forever, is heralded by the Signs of the Hour. Among the classical theologians of Islam, there is some difference of opinion regarding the number and the content of these apocalyptic signs, but essential elements are the appearance of the Mahdi and the Dajjal, the coming of Ya'juj and Ma'juj (the Gog and Magog from the Bible), and the descent and final victory of 'Isa ibn Maryam (Jesus). The chronology of these events, however, is rather vague. Before the Hour the Mahdi, the Rightly Guided One, will rise and conquer the earth. During his reign justice and prosperity will prevail. He will be challenged by the one-eyed impostor, the Dajjal, who will acquire some following, although the word kafir (infidel) is written on his brow. Then 'Isa will descend from heaven and accept Islam. Either he or the Mahdi — according to different traditions — will defeat the Dajjal. During this period two barbarous and fierce peoples, called Ya'juj and Ma'juj, will appear from the extremities of the earth, from behind the dam built by Alexander the Great in order to contain them, and they will wreak havoc on earth. Their mischief will be stopped by the First Blast of the Trumpet. Further signs are the coming of the Beast speaking to the people and blaming them for their unbelief that makes them incapable of recognizing the Signs of the Hour and the spreading of smoke covering the skies. Al-Jisr, following the popular nineteenth century Egyptian theologian and jurist al-Bayjuri (or: al-Bajuri) (1783–1860), mentions four more signs: the rising of the sun in the West, the destruction of the Ka'ba by Ethiopians after 'Isa's death, the disappearance of the words of the Koran from the copies of the Koran and from the memories of men, and finally, the returning of all inhabitants of the earth to unbelief.

The Resurrection and the events that follow it form the beginning of the second period, a period that will last forever. Upon the First Blast of the Trumpet, delivered by the angel Isrāfīl, all inhabitants of the earth and the heavens die. After a long time, the Second Blast of the Trumpet will resound, at which all the dead are resurrected. They will come out of their graves and be gathered on the Place of Standing (al-mawqif) to await judgement. This is an episode full of terrifying occurrences. They have to stand and wait for a very long time, while the sun has drawn near and stands only a mile above their heads. The heat will make them exude sweat that stinks more than a cadaver. They will be nearly immersed in this malodorous liquid, the height of which varies individually depending on the deeds one has committed.

The Judgement begins with an interrogation by the angels. Those interrogated will not be able to lie since their limbs, their skin and even the earth will testify to what they have done in their lifetime. Prophets, holy men (awlīyā'), Companions of the Prophet and other pious people may intercede for individuals. Then the angels will give each of them in his right hand the book in which his good deeds have been recorded and in his left hand the book in which his evil deeds have been written down. Thereupon, God will settle accounts with them, i.e. He will tell every person about any single deed whether it was good or bad. For each person the books will be weighed in the Scale (al-Mizān).

After the Reckoning, all creatures must proceed over the Bridge (al-Sīrāt) which extends over the abyss of the Blaze (al-Nār, or Jannaham, i.e. Hell) and at the end of which awaits the Garden (al-Janna, i.e. Paradise). The Bridge is thinner than a hair and sharper than a sword. Only those who have been allowed to go to the Garden will reach the other side; all others will fall down into the flames. The believers who have been obedient or whose deeds have been forgiven through intercession, will live forever in the Garden, the dwelling of pleasure. The believers who have committed sins will remain in the Blaze, the dwelling of punishment, for some period, after which they, too, are allowed to enter the Garden. The unbelievers will eternally remain in the Blaze. The descriptions of the Garden and the Blaze are abundant in the Koran and very lively. The Garden is represented as a large orchard with fruit trees, little rivers and a big pond. Those who have been saved from the Blaze, sit there eating fruits and drinking wine that causes no intoxication nor headache. Around them there are beautiful girls to give them sexual pleasure. The picture of the Blaze is that of a large fire or an oven into which people are forced by hell's angels. They can only eat the bitter fruits of the Zaqqum tree and drink stinking infested water.
the sun, it is God who moves these celestial bodies. That means that it is in His power to stop them or move them in a different direction. The descent of Isā from heavens is performed by angels carrying him, like during the ascension. Angels have been given the power to rise and descend between heaven and earth. As for the objection that a human person needs air for breathing which is lacking outside the atmosphere (kurat al-hawā'), al-Jisr's reply is that this is normally so, but that God can preserve life without it.

Concerning the attacks of Ya'jūj and Ma'jūj, al-Jisr counters the objections that geographers have explored the earth and have not found a trace of these peoples. For he asserts that not all parts of the earth have been visited, especially not in the Northern fringes of the earth, beyond the mountains of ice and the end of the frozen region and that it is possible that these people live in some remote unexplored region. It is known to those who have knowledge of cartography, he continues, that there are in the Northern regions, farther than Siberia, mountains covered with perennial snow and ice and that nobody in our times can travel there. It is also known that beyond those mountains there are regions extending to the end of the earth. It is not unlikely that this region, which because of its low level has less ice and snow, is inhabited by Ya'jūj and Ma'jūj. It is possible that in the time of Alexander the Great, which was thousands of years ago, there was a valley through which this region was accessible. In this valley then Alexander built his famous dam. Later the valley was filled up with snow and ice so that no one could pass anymore. However, when the Day of Resurrection approaches, the ice will disappear as a result of meteorological and geological factors, such as earthquakes, thus enabling these peoples to leave their abode and attack the rest of the world.

The crux in the Islamic representation of the Afterlife is the quickening of the dead. There are numerous Koranic verses expounding this theme. Although the Muslim philosophers and some modern Muslim scholars have maintained that resurrection is entirely spiritual and must be understood as the resurrection of the soul, the orthodox view, in accordance with unambiguous Koranic texts, holds that the bodies will be brought to life again. Even early in Islamic history, this belief had to be defended against the attacks of those who doubted the possibility that the same body could be restored to a person resurrected from death. What about a man who had been eaten by an another and whose body had become part of the body of the other? To which one of them will these parts be restored? Another common objection against the dogma of resurrection has to do with the question of how the first body that had perished and the resurrected body could be identical. And if these bodies were not identical, then the resurrected body, that had no relation with the first body, would be rewarded or punished for acts committed by the first body. These objections were countered by claiming that because of His omnipotence God was capable of resurrecting the dead as foretold in the Koran. To make it rationally acceptable, it was assumed that a man's body consists of two kinds of matter: original components (ajzā' āstilīyya), that remained with a person from his birth to his death, and subordinate components (ajzā' fadliyya). Since the body of a person can grow fat or skinny during his lifetime, it seemed obvious that not all components of a person's body were necessarily linked to his personality. Only the original components would be restored to life and reunited with the soul. After that subordinate parts, originating from the same or another body, would be added to mould a new body in the shape of the original person.

Al-Jisr elaborates this theory, and through it he can explain the events in the grave and the Resurrection. First he defends the existence of a soul against attacks by the materialists, who claim that no one has ever seen the soul leaving the body through its mouth at the moment of death. On the basis of Revelation we have to accept the existence of a soul, although we cannot perceive it with our senses. This is, however, not against reason. The materialists, he asserts, assume the existence of ether and of "microscopic animals" (hayawānāt mikruskābiyya). Why then can they not accept the existence of an invisible soul? From the revealed texts we know that it is alive in itself and does not need anything else to make it alive, that it possesses perception, and that when it settles down in a body, it makes it alive and gives it perception and the other characteristics of life. It can be compared, he says, with the phenomenon magnetism that is transmitted to a piece of iron when one rubs a magnet on it.

As a starting point for his detailed theory, al-Jisr takes the verse "And when thy Lord took from the Children of Adam, from their loins, their seed, and made them testify touching themselves, 'Am I not your Lord?' They said, 'Yes, we testify' (...)" (K. 7:172). According to several Traditions this verse must be interpreted as follows:

First God took out of Adam's loin his offspring (dharrīyya). From these particles (dharr), that He had taken from Adam, He took their offspring in particles. Thereupon He took from these last particles their offspring in particles until the last of the human species. Then He created reason, understanding, movement and speech in them and directed the words 'Am I not your Lord?'. Then they all said 'Yes', that is 'Thou art our Lord'. Then He returned all of them to Adam's loins.

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19 For example K. 36:38-39: "(...) he says, 'Who shall quicken the bones when they are decayed?' Say: 'He shall quicken them who originated them the first time; (...)'.

20 See for example Ramadan b. Muhammad, Hāshiyya, 227; Muhammad al-Dasūqī, Hāshiyya 'alā sharh Umm al-Bārihīn li-Muhammad b. Yūsuf al-Sanā'ī (Cairo, Mustafā al-Bābi al-Halabi 1939) 220. In the latter work the original components are identified as bones and muscles and the subordinate components as fat.

21 Risāla, 341-365; Harān, 89-91.

22 Risūla, 352.

23 For the Traditions regarding the interpretation of this verse, see Muhammad b. 'Alī al-Shawkānī, Fath al-Qadīr, 2nd impr. (Cairo 1964) II, 262-264.
Al-Jisr equates these particles (dharr, sg. dharrā), which he represents as invisible to the naked eye but already endowed with organs, with the notion of original components and infers from this verse and its traditional interpretation that God first created the original components or particles of all individuals of the human species to exist until the end of time. Then He took Adam’s particle, created his body out of subordinate components, after which He put the particles of all future humanity in his loins. This is not implausible, since, according to the scientists, one little drop of water can contain as many “microscopic animals” as there are men on earth. Finally, He placed Adam’s soul in his particle located in his body. To this the Koran refers with the words: “When I have shaped him [Adam] and breathed My spirit in him, (...)” (K. 15:29). From the particle, life spread to the rest of the body. He regards the heart as the most plausible centre for the soul and the particle. Physiologists, he claims, agree that the force produced by the contractions of the heart is sufficient for the circulation of the blood. However, they are in disagreement about the cause of the cardiac movement. The latest explanation seems to be that this cause is situated in the heart itself, viz. in neural nodes (‘uqad ‘asabīyya), but they still cannot explain why these nodes produce a regular, discontinuous activity and not a continuous activity. Al-Jisr asserts that it is probable that the heart is the seat of the human particle and that when the soul settles down in the heart, it makes it alive and causes this regular movement that produces the circulation of the blood. Via this circulation, life spreads through the body.

In order to be able to address them, as mentioned in the Koran, God took all the particles out of Adam’s loins and gave them their souls. After they acknowledged him, as the Koran tells us, He took away the souls to store them somewhere in the universe and placed back the particles in Adam’s loins, probably through the pores of his skin, just like germs may enter and leave the human body, as the scientists claim.

These particles left Adam’s body during intercourse, carried by spermatozoa. Or, to put it more precisely, the particle of the son to be begotten and the particles of all future offspring of this son were transferred during intercourse to the seed (bizra) produced by his wife’s ovary. After the son’s particle has been transferred to the seed, God created its body (haykal) from this seed and the seminal fluid. These contained, of course, only subordinate components. The particles of the offspring were placed in the loins. At a certain moment God attached the soul to the particle, after which it became alive. This happened in the same manner for all of Adam’s sons, and then for their sons and so forth until the end of the world.

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24 Al-Jisr gives a full and for the most part accurate description of spermatozoids, mentioning their size (1/500 to 1/600 inch), their way of propelling themselves and their speed (1 inch per 13 minutes) and the duration of their activity (seven or eight days within the female body, 24 hours outside). Risāla, 356.

25 For ‘Abduh, see Adams, Islam and Modernism, 136–137.
26 Husān, 100; Risāla, 285–6.
examine how conclusively the latter were proven. And often, in his view, the evidence does not bear the test: as we have seen, he did not even unequivocally accept that the earth revolves around the sun. As a result of this attitude, he only seldom was compelled to abandon traditional interpretations of the Koran. The contrast with 'Abdulh is clearly illustrated in al-Jisr's view on the meaning of the word *jinn*. Without reservation he defends the traditional interpretation that they are invisible beings created from a fine and transparent matter, who are able to assume different shapes and to perform difficult tasks and are obliged to follow Islamic law. He tries to demonstrate that their existence is rationally possible as their matter may be similar to ether or air and arranged by God in such a way as to confer the above-mentioned faculties to them. Alternatively, their invisibility may be explained by the fact that God, who has created in every man the faculty of vision, has not created in us the faculty of seeing them.  

His conservatism is also evident from his eschatological views. It is indicative that he closely follows the commentary of the nineteenth century scholar al-Bayjuri, whose writings on theology and law represent the orthodox tradition of learning. Al-Jisr is at ease with the supernatural phenomena that are part of the traditional eschatology. For he sticks to the classical Islamic dogma that there are no laws of nature, but only "customs" of God in creating a series of discrete events in a certain order, and that He is free not to follow these customs, in which case a miracle occurs. Here, too, his ideas differ considerably from 'Abdulh's position. The latter wrote only in very abstract and general terms on eschatology and accepted the existence of laws of nature, since, in his view, God's wisdom makes Him follow these laws in creating events, so as to maintain order in the Universe.

Al-Jisr's conservative attitude is very much in evidence in his theory on the composition of the human body and human procreation, which is no more than an elaboration of traditional notions developed by the theologians in response to logical objections against the resurrection of the body. He bolstered this theory by a very eclectic use of the natural sciences. Science and rational argumentation for al-Jisr are not sources of inspiration for reform and renewal but are subordinate to the traditional dogmas and only serve to make them palatable to new generations of Muslims who have become familiar with scientific theories and terminology. In the last instance his explanations are not rooted in scientific theories, but in the religious dogma of God's omnipotence. That he only propagated traditional religious truths and did not offer a really innovative view of Islam may explain the fact that his popularity was short-lived and that now he is almost forgotten.

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