

THE DISCIPLES OF JESUS (PART 1 OF 2): WHO WERE AL-HAWARIYOON?

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By: Aisha Stacey (© 2019 IslamReligion.com)

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The disciples of Jesus are known in the Quran and the traditions of Prophet Muhammad, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him, as Al-Hawariyoon. This is an Arabic word meaning simply, the disciples of Jesus. However, hawariyoon, like many words in the Arabic language, has specific and general meanings, and in some cases, particularly in Islamic words, there are layers of meanings.



Hawari is derived from the root Arabic word hawr that means to whiten, to bleach, to purify, to clean, to change, to transform, to amend and to alter. Hawari is a singular word and literally means, he who whitens clothes, he who has been appointed, chosen, and purified from all kinds of defects, and a companion or a helper. The plural is hawariyoon.

Prophet Jesus' companions were also known as apostles. The words apostles or disciples were used to differentiate Jesus' close companions from followers whose numbers were steadily growing. Islamic scholars have pondered and discussed the reason for calling the disciples Al-Hawariyoon throughout Islamic history. Renowned Islamic Quran scholar Ibn Kathir states that the disciples were so named because of their white clothes and he also mentions the meaning of a helper or supporter.

It is interesting to note that the majority of Jesus' disciples were fishermen and their clothes would have been white due to their daily toil. The whiteness could then be extrapolated to include the whitening of people's hearts through the teachings of Prophet Jesus. Other scholars have stated that hawari implies one who is capable of being a leader, and almost all scholars agree that a hawari is a sincere person or friend.

The scholars of Christianity and Islam agree that Prophet Jesus was surrounded by twelve supporters, who were his close friends, companions. Quran has addressed Jesus' companions as Al-Hawariyoon five times in four different verses. The first time

they are mentioned is in Chapter three of the Quran, entitled The Family of Imran. This family includes many people well known to Christians including, Jesus and his mother Mary, and John, known as the Baptist.

At the time Jesus began his mission many Israelites were so far astray from the truth that Jesus considered it to be disbelief. He called them back to the worship of the One True God, yet most of those around him rejected his call and failed to heed his message. After revealing and clarifying that he is a Messenger from God, Jesus asks those listening to his message, who among them would be his helpers in God's cause.

"Then when Jesus came to know of their disbelief, he said, 'Who will be my helpers in God's cause?' Al-Hawariyoon (the disciples) replied, 'We are the helpers of God; we believe in God, so bear witness that we submit to God.'" (Quran 3:52)

They continued to pledge their allegiance to God and His Messenger Jesus.

"Our Lord! We believe in what You have sent down and we follow the Messenger (Jesus); so write us down among those who bear witness (to the truth)." (Quran 3:53)

Then in another chapter God Himself reveals that He was responsible for the people who became the disciples of Jesus, Al-Hawariyoon.

"I (God) put it in the hearts of Al-Hawariyoon to believe in Me and My Messenger, they said: 'We believe. And bear witness that we are submitted to God.'" (Quran 5:111)

The disciples were submitted to God; they followed the teachings of Jesus and were his companions and supporters. They helped him call the Israelites back to the worship of One God. Jesus never called himself God and the disciples were fully aware that they worshipped God and followed a man. It is the man known as the apostle Paul who called people to worship Jesus. It is wrong to assume that Paul was a disciple—he never met Jesus nor did he hear him speak or teach.

Paul was a Pharisee, a Jewish sect that Dictionary.com defines as strict in its observance of religious ceremonies and practices, and adherence to oral laws and traditions. Remarkably the secondary definition is a sanctimonious, self-righteous, or hypocritical person. Many thinkers and scholars believe that Paul almost singlehandedly destroyed the teachings of Jesus.

The scholars of Islam reflect that there are two reasons why Paul would have joined the disciples after Jesus' death. Either, in his role as a Pharisee, he was sent to undermine and sabotage the new movement, or the experience^[1] he had on the road to Damascus was a trick from Satan, designed to undermine and sabotage Jesus' teachings. Quran is silent about Paul and also does not mention or imply that any of Jesus' companions, Al-Hawariyoon, ever betrayed him.

Chapter five of the Quran is named The Table Spread with Food. It refers to Al-Hawariyoon asking Jesus if God could send down a table spread with food. What exactly they meant has been discussed often, and it seems most likely that they were asking Jesus either playfully or seriously if God *would* supply them with a feast rather than asking if He *could* do such a thing. Jesus warned them not to speak so flippantly but nevertheless asked God to perform a miracle.

"(Remember) when Al-Hawariyoon said, 'O Jesus, son of Mary! Can your Lord send down to us a table spread with food from heaven?' Jesus replied, 'Fear God, if you are indeed believers.' They said: 'We wish to eat thereof and to satisfy our hearts (to be stronger in Faith), and to know that you have indeed told us the truth and that we ourselves be its witnesses.' Jesus, son of Mary, prayed, 'O God, our Lord! Send us from the 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 sustenance, for You are the Best of sustainers.' God answered, 'I will send it down to you, but if any of you after that disbelieves, then I will punish him with a torment such as I have not inflicted on anyone among all humankind and jinn.'" (Quran 5:112-115)

Among the reasons for their request was that the disciples wanted to be witnesses before all of humankind. They wanted to spread the message of Jesus by proclaiming the miracles they witnessed with their own eyes. The disciples followed the teaching of Jesus even after his death. Unfortunately, over time, the true message of Jesus and the faith of the disciples was discarded and forgotten.

In the next part, we will learn what Prophet Muhammad said about Jesus and his disciples and compare Al-Hawariyoon to the companions of Prophet Muhammad.

Footnotes:

- [1] In his own correspondence Paul (formerly known as Saul) describes having a vision while on a journey to Damascus. He was surrounded by a heavenly light and either saw or heard Jesus. This convinced him to stop persecuting the followers of Jesus and join them.

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