

IBN SULTAN

# CHRISTIANITY COMPARED WITH ISLAM



**CRUCIFIXION:**  
what do the Qur'an and the Bible say?

وَمَا قَالُوهُ وَمَا صَلَبُوهُ وَلَٰكِن شُبِّهَ لَهُمْ وَإِنَّ الَّذِينَ أَخَلَفُوا فِيهِ

# CONTENTS

|                           |    |
|---------------------------|----|
| Introduction              | 3  |
| Did Jesus die on a cross? | 4  |
| Was Jesus substituted?    | 15 |
| Did Jesus die at all?     | 27 |
| What happened to Jesus?   | 34 |

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# INTRODUCTION

Was Jesus crucified?

If you've ever asked this question, you are probably asking about two things at once. First, you might ask, was Jesus executed on a cross? This is an *historical* question. Secondly, you might ask, was there a meaning or purpose in what happened to Jesus? This is a *theological* question. Both questions deserve our attention.

Jesus' crucifixion has long divided opinion. For Christians, it's an historical event, and an important and necessary part of Jesus' earthly ministry. Christians see Jesus' death on the cross as an act of atoning sacrifice 'for our sins'. It brings forgiveness to all who trust Jesus and 'repent', turning away from our sinful paths.

However, for many Muslims the very idea that Jesus was crucified and died 'for our sins' is scandalous and offensive. It is rejected both as an historical event and a theological one. After all, why would Allah allow his prophet to die on a cross in this dishonourable way? Is Allah not mighty to forgive sins of mankind by simply saying 'you're forgiven'?

One Qur'anic passage specifically mentions Jesus' crucifixion – and it swiftly rejects the suggestion that Jesus was killed or crucified.<sup>1</sup> Other early Islamic sources are silent on the subject. Over the centuries, two main schools of Islamic belief have emerged:

- Sunni Muslims tend to believe Jesus was substituted for another person at the cross. This is known as **Substitution Theory**.
- Others, including the Ahmadiyya sect, say Jesus was hung on a cross, but only fainted and did not die as a result of his injuries. This is known as **Swoon Theory**.<sup>2</sup>

Whatever you think, this booklet invites you to examine the evidence. Why do Christians believe the crucifixion story? Where did it come from? And how does it connect with Jesus' life and message?

We'll explore Christian and Muslim accounts of what could have happened to Jesus. Together, we'll evaluate:

- Was Jesus crucified on a cross?
- Was Jesus substituted? Did someone else die in his place?
- Did Jesus only faint (swoon) on the cross?

Let's begin by looking at different views about what happened to Jesus.

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<sup>1</sup> Sura 4:157-158. The following verse, 159, does mention Jesus ('Isa) dying. Muslim scholars interpret this reference with his Second Coming in the future, 'after he comes down again' (see Tafsir Ibn Abbas).

<sup>2</sup> Another secular 'swoon theory' was also proposed in the 18th century, but most scholars today reject this.

# DID JESUS DIE ON A CROSS?

The question of whether Jesus died on a cross is closely connected to his claims about himself. Who was he? And what did he consider to be his primary mission?

## † Christian Perspective

### Jesus is the Messiah, the King of the Jews

The gospel of Luke is the third of the Bible's four biographies of Jesus.<sup>3</sup> It's based on the testimony of Luke, a doctor from Antioch and close companion of the 12 disciples.<sup>4</sup> Luke carefully researched eyewitness testimony about what happened, and describes how he met with many people who knew Jesus and witnessed his ministry.

Early in his gospel account, Luke describes a moment at the beginning of Jesus' ministry:

He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written:

***"The Spirit of the Lord is on me,  
because he has anointed me  
to proclaim good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners  
and recovery of sight for the blind,  
to set the oppressed free,  
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour."***

*Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him. He began by saying to them,*

***"Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."***<sup>5</sup>

Hundreds of years before Jesus, the Torah, Psalms and Prophets had spoken about God's promised Messiah. He would be pure and mighty, with unparalleled authority to rescue his people from sin. He would heal,

3 The word 'gospel' is based on a Greek word meaning 'good news' (*Injeel* in Arabic – see Sura 3:48)

4 Luke 1:1-4; Colossians 4:14; 2 Timothy 4:11; Philemon 1:240

5 Luke 4:16-21

establish God's kingdom and subdue God's enemy. In some places, descriptions of this Messiah even resembled God himself.<sup>6</sup> People were excited when rumours began to circulate: the Messiah had finally arrived!<sup>7</sup> So Jesus' comment about scripture being fulfilled was provocative. Why?

1. Jesus announced the arrival of God's promised king, the Messiah,<sup>8</sup> the 'Anointed One'
2. Jesus was claiming *himself* to be fulfilment of Isaiah's prophecy, the Messiah<sup>9</sup>

John the Baptist (Yahya) asked Jesus, "Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?" Jesus replied by pointing to his amazing ministry: "The blind receive sight ... the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor."<sup>10</sup> This was what was expected of the Messiah. He would not only rule as a king; he would perform miracles. The High Priest, Caiaphas, asked Jesus bluntly: "Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?" Jesus replied, "I am."<sup>11</sup>

### Jesus claimed the kingdom of God had arrived with his ministry:

"The time has come. The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!"<sup>12</sup> Jesus did not simply claim to be a messenger of God's kingdom, *he claimed to be the king of that kingdom*. John the Baptist recognised Jesus' unique authority, and said of him, "I am not worthy to untie his sandals."<sup>13</sup>

But what was so special about this Messiah? And what was he supposed to accomplish?

### Jesus claimed authority to forgive sins

On many occasions, Jesus claimed to forgive sins by his own authority.<sup>14</sup> The devout Jews who heard him found this blasphemous. After all, by forgiving people's sins, Jesus was claiming an authority which devout Jews knew was unique to God himself: "Why does this fellow talk like that? He's blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?"<sup>15</sup>

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6 Daniel 7:13-14. The Son of Man was another Messianic title which Jesus frequently used of himself (see also Mark 14:61-62)

7 At this time in history, the Jews in Israel had been subjected to foreign rulers for centuries. First the Greeks, and later the Romans, had desecrated God's Temple and humiliated his people (see 1 Maccabees 1:10-64). But the people hoped the Messiah king would help restore Israel to its former glory.

8 See Psalm 2 and 1 Samuel 16:10-13. Anointing was associated with God's favour and authority given to kings in Israel. 'Messiah' was shorthand for the prophesied king of Israel in the line of David.

9 The Greek word for Messiah is *Christos*. This is where the modern word 'Christ' comes from. In the earliest Bible manuscripts, dated to shortly after the lives of his disciples, Jesus is called Christ hundreds of times.

10 Matthew 11:4

11 Mark 14:61-62

12 Mark 1:14-15

13 John 1:27

14 See Luke 24:46-47. This is also one of the occasions on which Jesus foretold his crucifixion and resurrection.

15 Luke 5:21; see also Isaiah 43:25

Immediately Jesus knew in his spirit that this was what they were thinking in their hearts, and he said to them ... **“I want you to know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins.”**<sup>16</sup>

Jesus did not merely *claim* the authority to forgive sins; he *demonstrated* it. He healed people’s bodily *and* spiritual needs.

In other ways, too, Jesus made claims to authority which belonged to God alone. Jesus claimed:<sup>17</sup>

1. Unique relationship with the Father, God
2. Authority over the Torah, fulfilling it and bringing new revelation
3. Authority over the natural world
4. Authority over angelic beings
5. He had lived forever, before creation itself
6. A right to be worshipped
7. God’s name, ‘I AM,’ by which He spoke to Moses
8. Authority over the Day of Judgment

It is no wonder Jesus offended the Jewish religious rulers, the Pharisees and teachers of the Law. They feared his influence and hated his claims about himself. It was not long before ‘they conspired to arrest Jesus covertly and kill him’.<sup>18</sup>

## Jesus was killed, by crucifixion

During his ministry, Jesus claimed he would ‘give his life as a ransom for many’.<sup>19</sup> This was not a new teaching. Centuries before, the Prophet Isaiah foretold how the Messiah’s death would pay the price to free God’s people.<sup>20</sup> Now, Jesus claimed, this prophecy was coming to pass:

“We are going up to Jerusalem,” he said, “and the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and the teachers of the Law. **They will condemn him to death** and will hand him over to the Gentiles, who will mock him and spit on him, flog him **and kill him**. Three days later he will rise.”<sup>21</sup>

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16 Mark 2:8-10; see also verses 11-12.

17 (1) John 10:30; Luke 10:22; (2) Matthew 5:17, 21-22; (3) Matthew 8:27; (4) Matthew 25:31; (5) John 17:5; (6) Matthew 14:33; Luke 19:37-41; Luke 24:52; (7) John 8:58; Exodus 3:14; (8) Mark 14:61-64; Matthew 25:31-34.

18 Matthew 26:4

19 Mark 10:45

20 Isaiah 53:4-11 – this is part of a longer prophecy which points very clearly to the life and death of Jesus. The oldest intact scroll for Isaiah, found at Qumran in 1947, dates to at least a century before Jesus’ birth.

21 Mark 10:33-34

22 Full accounts are provided in Matthew 26:1-27:66; Mark 1:43-15:47; Luke 22:47-23:56 and John 18:1-19:42

This is precisely what happened to Jesus.<sup>22</sup>

After a hasty overnight arrest and sentencing, Jesus was sentenced to be crucified. On the day of his crucifixion, around 9am ('the third hour' in the Jewish calendar), Jesus was led to a place known as Golgotha, crucified between two thieves, and watched by a crowd of spectators. By 3pm ('the ninth hour'), Roman soldiers checked and confirmed that Jesus was dead. Shortly after, his body was taken down for burial and placed in the tomb of a wealthy sympathiser, Joseph of Arimathea. The Jewish Sanhedrin authorities knew the location of the tomb, and placed a Temple guard at its entrance.



## Notes

## Islamic Perspective

### Jesus is the Messiah, a messenger of Allah

The Qur'an includes several revelations identifying Jesus as the Messiah (al Masih) and the messenger of Allah. In Sura 4 [An Nisa'] it is written,

الْمَسِيحُ عِيسَى ابْنُ مَرْيَمَ رَسُولَ اللَّهِ وَكَلِمَتُهُ أَلْقَاهَا إِلَىٰ مَرْيَمَ وَرُوحٌ مِنْهُ

The Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, was **only a messenger of Allah**, and His word which He conveyed unto Mary, and a spirit from Him...<sup>23</sup>

Jesus is only a messenger. Although he performed many miracles, this did not make him the Son of God. Like the prophets before him, Jesus performs miracles only by Allah's leave. Yet this is no small thing. Jesus is honoured as one of the greatest prophets of Islam.

Sura 3 of the Qur'an, Al Imran, describes several remarkable facts about Jesus:

(And remember) when the angels said: O Mary! **Allah gives you glad tidings of a word from him, whose name is the Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary, illustrious in the world and the Hereafter, and one of those brought near (to Allah). He will speak unto mankind in his cradle and in his manhood, and he is of the righteous.** She said: My Lord! How can I have a child when no mortal has touched me? He said: So (it will be). Allah creates what He will. If He decrees a thing, He says to it only: Be! and it is. And He will teach him the Scripture and wisdom, and the Torah and the Gospel, And will make **him a messenger to the Children of Israel, (saying): Lo! I come unto you with a sign from your Lord. I fashion for you out of clay the likeness of a bird, and I breathe into it and it is a bird, by Allah's permission. I heal him who was born blind, and the leper, and I raise the dead, by Allah's permission.** And I announce to you what you eat and what you store up in your houses. In this verily is a sign for you, if you are to be believers.<sup>24</sup>

This revelation demonstrates many reasons to respect Jesus as one of the great prophets of Islam:

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23 Sura 4:171

24 Sura 3:45-49



- He is a Word from Allah<sup>25</sup>
- He is born miraculously of the virgin Mary (Mariam)
- He is honoured in this world and the next
- He is brought near to Allah
- He is a miracle worker, in childhood and adulthood
- He is a Messenger to the Children of Israel
- He brings signs from Allah
- He heals the sick and raises the dead
- He will come again to bring Allah's judgment on the earth

In addition, Jesus is unique among human beings because he was pure and without sin from the moment of his birth. In the Qur'an, this is how the angel Gabriel (Jibril) describes Jesus at the announcement of his virgin birth:

قَالَ إِنَّمَا أَنَا رَسُولُ رَبِّكِ لِأَهَبَ لَكِ غُلَامًا زَكِيًّا ﴿١٩﴾

He said: I am only a messenger of your Lord, **that I may bestow on you a faultless son.**<sup>26</sup>

In what sense is Jesus without sin? The authentic (sahih) hadith of al-Bukhari provides an explanation regarding the meaning of Jesus' unique innocence:

The Prophet said, "When any human being is born Satan touches him at both sides of the body with his two fingers, except **Jesus, the son of Mary, whom Satan tried to touch but failed**, for he touched the placenta-cover instead."<sup>27</sup>

Because Jesus was born a pure human being, and remained pure, he is all the more special and honoured among the prophets of Allah.

## Jesus claimed the authority of a great prophet

Jesus (ʿIsa) is indeed the Messiah (al Masih), a messenger from Allah. But what does it mean to call Jesus the Messiah? The tafsir of Ibn Kathir explains:

Isa [Jesus] was called "Al-Masih" (the Messiah) because when he touched (Mash) those afflicted with an illness, they would be healed by Allah's leave.<sup>28</sup>

25 Some say Jesus received a message, the Injeel (Gospel) (Sura 57:27)

26 Sura 19:19

27 Sahih Bukhari 4, 54:506

28 Tafsir Ibn Kathir, 'Delivering the Good news to Maryam of 'Isa's birth'

As we can see, Jesus' title as 'the Messiah' is a reference to the healings he accomplished. But these healings are not accomplished on his own: they are all performed by Allah's permission. Allah enabled him to perform signs for the people – even to raise the dead.

According to the Qur'an, Jesus came to preach the message of Islam to the Children of Israel. But his ministry would not end there. He appointed disciples, helpers to assist in his important ministry, and they were given victory by Allah's leave to become uppermost in their ministry, until the day of his return.

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا كُونُوا أَنصَارَ اللَّهِ كَمَا قَالَ عِيسَى ابْنُ مَرْيَمَ لِّلْحَوَارِيِّينَ مَنْ أَنصَارِي إِلَى اللَّهِ قَالَ الْحَوَارِيُّونَ نَحْنُ  
 أَنصَارُ اللَّهِ فَتَمَنَّتْ طَآئِفَةٌ مِّنْ بَنِي إِسْرَائِيلَ وَكَفَرَت طَّآئِفَةٌ فَأَيَّدْنَا الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا عَلَىٰ عَدُوِّهِمْ فَأَصْبَحُوا ظَاهِرِينَ ﴿١٤٦﴾

O you who believe! Be Allah's helpers, even as Jesus son of Mary said to the disciples: Who are my helpers for Allah? They said: We are Allah's helpers. And a party of the Children of Israel believed, while a party disbelieved. Then **We strengthened those who believed against their enemy, and they became the uppermost.**<sup>30</sup>

### Jesus was not killed, nor was he crucified

The Qur'an is usually held to deny categorically that Jesus was crucified. In Sura 4:157-158, this point is addressed directly:

وَقَوْلِهِمْ إِنَّا قَتَلْنَا الْمَسِيحَ عِيسَى ابْنَ مَرْيَمَ رَسُولَ اللَّهِ وَمَا قَتَلُوهُ وَمَا صَلَّبُوهُ وَلَٰكِن شُبِّهَ لَهُمْ<sup>٤</sup> وَإِنَّ الَّذِينَ أَخْتَلَفُوا فِيهِ لَفِي شَكٍّ مِّنْهُ مَا لَهُمْ بِهِ مِنْ عِلْمٍ إِلَّا اتِّبَاعَ الظَّنِّ وَمَا قَتَلُوهُ يَقِينًا ﴿١٥٧﴾  
 بَل رَّفَعَهُ اللَّهُ إِلَيْهِ<sup>٥</sup> وَكَانَ اللَّهُ عَزِيزًا حَكِيمًا ﴿١٥٨﴾

And because of their saying: We slew the Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, Allah's messenger - **they slew him not nor crucified him, but it appeared so to them**; and those who disagree concerning it are in doubt of it; they have no knowledge of it except pursuit of a conjecture; they slew him not for certain. But Allah took him up to Himself. Allah was ever Mighty, Wise.<sup>31</sup>

In this short passage, a number of important counter-claims are made about Jesus' apparent crucifixion:

30 Sura 61:14

31 Sura 4:157-158

- Jesus' enemies, the Jews, were boasting of having slain him, and believed they had done so
- They did not kill him
- They did not crucify him
- Jesus only appeared to have been killed
- In reality, Allah took Jesus up to Paradise

The Qur'an clearly states that Jewish and Christian accounts of Jesus' crucifixion are confused and unreliable. These accounts amount only to conjecture – speculative disputations about what really happened. According to the Qur'an, they are not based on real evidence or revelation.<sup>32</sup>

A conventional reading of the Qur'an establishes that the 'crucifixion' of Jesus was only an illusion. Though some were convinced of Jesus' crucifixion, their convictions were misguided. After all, Allah is powerful to protect his messengers, so Jesus was saved from his enemies before they could harm him. In his tafsir commenting on these events, Ibn Abbas writes,

(But Allah took him up unto Himself) in heaven. (Allah was ever Mighty) in His vengeance against His enemies, (Wise) by granting triumph to his friends: **He saved His Prophet and destroyed their man.**<sup>33</sup>

The implication is clear. Jesus' enemies wanted him dead, but Allah undermined their plans, destroyed one of their own, and saved Jesus so he did not die on the cross.

## Comparison

Did Jesus die on a cross? This question relates to our faith and theology, and the way we look at Jesus and our own lives. But it's also a historical question. To determine what really happened, we need to consider the historical evidence.

Like a crime scene investigator, we must ask:

- Who were **the first witnesses** (eyewitness accounts)
- The **independence and agreement** of witnesses (multiple attestation)
- The **reliability** of the early witnesses (authorial intent)
- The 'warts and all' **honesty** of their account (criterion of embarrassment)
- What **archaeology** shows us (archaeological evidence)
- What **historians** agree on (scholarly consensus)

<sup>32</sup> Sura 4:157 (see also Sahih International and Yusuf Ali translations)

<sup>33</sup> Tafsir Ibn Abbas [Sura 3:54] - <https://bit.ly/2qoq2ni>

## THE BIBLE: Jesus was crucified for blasphemy under Pontius Pilate.

### Eyewitnesses

Jesus' first disciples and followers gave clear eyewitness accounts of his crucifixion, burial and resurrection.<sup>34</sup> They named multiple eyewitnesses – and entire communities – which had witnessed Jesus death and resurrection. The earliest testimonies of Jesus bear witness to these events.<sup>35</sup>

### Out-group support

First century witnesses of Jesus' crucifixion under Pontius Pilate were not just Christians. They include Jewish and pagan figures who opposed the Christian community.<sup>36</sup> Today, most scholars of antiquity overwhelmingly agree, 'there is not the slightest doubt about the fact of Jesus' crucifixion under Pontius Pilate'.<sup>37</sup>

### Consistent, embarrassing testimony

Jesus' first disciples proclaimed him as a crucified Messiah. But why? This claim did not bring them honour, wealth or power, but rather, ridicule and danger. Many early Christians, like Peter and James, were killed for refusing to deny their testimony.<sup>38</sup> There is no reason to conclude they were lying about what they witnessed. They do not present themselves as heroes<sup>39</sup>, and the evidence suggests that they truly believed they had witnessed Jesus, crucified and resurrected.

### Plenty of archaeological and historical evidence

Outside the Bible, artefacts, manuscripts and the historical record confirm the credibility of the Bible's claim that Jesus was crucified.<sup>40</sup> The gospel writers proclaiming 'Christ crucified' provide detailed and accurate descriptions of first-century society.



Artefacts supporting the crucifixion (see footnote 40).

34 For example, 1 Thessalonians: 'Jesus died and rose again...' (4:14)

35 One such testimony, 1 Corinthians 15:3-8 is recognised to cite a tradition which was established within two years of Jesus' crucifixion. See Reginald Fuller, *The Formation of the Resurrection Narratives*, (1980, p.10)

36 The most famous example of this is Josephus' 'Testimonium' (*Antiquities* 18, 3, 3), written around 93 AD

37 Dominic Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (1995)

38 The stoning of James in 62AD is recorded by the first-century historian, Josephus, in his *Antiquities* [20,9,1]

39 This is what scholars refer to as the 'criterion of embarrassment', which means that an embarrassing testimony is often more likely to be true (since made-up stories tend to present their author in a heroic light)

40 Artefacts supporting the crucifixion account include the ossuary (burial box) of Caiaphas the High Priest, a first-century inscription to Pontius Pilate, and a graffiti mocking Christians for worshipping a crucified Messiah. These artefacts are housed in the Israel Museum, in Jerusalem, and the Palatine Hill Museum, in Rome.

## THE QUR'AN: Jesus escaped death, with Allah's help

### No eyewitnesses

The Basilidian gnostics, a heretical sect, were the first to suggest Jesus escaped the cross.<sup>41</sup> Their claim emerged after 130AD – a century after Jesus was sentenced. The Qur'an's later account of Jesus escaping the cross did not emerge for over 600 years. Unless we are already committed to the idea that the Qur'an is perfect (Sura 98:1-3), there is no obvious reason to believe these traditions over the eyewitness accounts of the New Testament.

### Lacks out-group support

No first-century witnesses suggest that Jesus escaped the cross. Second century Christian teachers immediately rejected the gnostic claim that Jesus was not crucified, which was at odds with the earliest eyewitnesses. Today, scholars of antiquity overwhelmingly reject the idea that Jesus escaped or survived the cross.<sup>42</sup>

### Inconsistent, motivated testimony

Basilidians rejected Jesus' crucifixion because they saw him as a god, *without a physical body*.<sup>43</sup> But Muslims considered Jesus a mortal prophet, *with a physical body*. They rejected Jesus' crucifixion because it seemed incompatible with his status as a prophet under Allah's protection. Both of these claims are theologically motivated.

Second century gnostic groups, like the Basilidians, are not credible sources. Despite contradicting the testimony of the twelve apostles, they falsely attached the apostles' names to their works long after these eyewitnesses had died (e.g. the Gospel of Peter). Similarly, the Qur'an's credibility regarding Jesus' crucifixion is weakened because it cannot establish credible links to the testimony of Jesus' twelve apostles.

### No archaeological or historical evidence

The historical record provides no evidence to support the idea that Jesus escaped crucifixion, or was substituted. The gnostic and Islamic accounts promoting this theory fail to provide details, and they show a misunderstanding of first-century society.<sup>44</sup>

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41 See later section, "What did the first witnesses say?"

42 For example, in *The Resurrection* (2008, foreword), Geza Vermes, acknowledges that Jesus was certainly "arrested, tried and crucified." Other scholars show that such a crucifixion was certainly fatal. see Joseph W Bergeron (2011), *The Crucifixion of Jesus* in *Journal of Forensic and Legal Medicine* [19,3: pp.113-116].

43 This belief was based on the gnostic idea that all flesh was evil

44 For example, in *Ibn Kathir's tafsir on Sura 4:157, the commentator claims Jesus' enemies gained approval from 'the King of Damascus' to execute him. This is certainly wrong.* Jews in Jerusalem were not answerable to Damascus until 636 AD.

## Was Jesus a prophet of Islam?

The Qur'an and other Islamic sources claim Jesus' primary mission was to promote Islam. It's said his disciples were willing missionaries of Islamic monotheism, appointed by God 'to call the Greeks and the Israelites to Islam',<sup>45</sup> and set apart for success until Judgment Day.<sup>46</sup> But this claim finds no support in pre-Islamic writings, the archaeological record or the practices of the early church.

The earliest accounts of Jesus present him as the divine, crucified Son of God, a high priest offering sacrifice<sup>47</sup>, and the true Messiah king – not only for Israel, but for all people.<sup>48</sup> Muslims may conclude that Jesus' early witnesses were wilful or accidental deceivers, and that Allah allowed for the immediate corruption, or loss, of Jesus' message. Yet this would contradict the Qur'an, and its presentation of the disciples as successful until the day of Jesus' return.<sup>49</sup>

## ? Questions to consider

- Why did Jesus' enemies want to crucify him?
- Were Jesus and his disciples messengers of Islam? If so, how successful were they?
- If Jesus' first disciples were themselves deceived, who deceived them?
- If Allah substituted another in Jesus' place, why was it justified to torture this person?
- What historical evidence is there for the Qur'an's version of events?



## Notes

45 See Ibn Kathir commentary on Sura 61:14 - <https://bit.ly/2Nq0XjJ>

46 Sura 61:14

47 John 1:35-37; Hebrews 6:20

48 John 19:12-22; 1 Timothy 6:13-14

49 Sura 3:55



# WAS JESUS SUBSTITUTED?

Christians agree that Jesus was crucified. By contrast, Muslims hold a variety of views about what happened to Jesus. Let's consider the most popular Islamic claim about Jesus, found in the Qur'an: the Theory of Substitution.

## Christian Perspective

### Jewish authorities plotted to kill Jesus for committing blasphemy

Why was Jesus sentenced to death? The Jewish authorities had plenty of reasons to convict him, and most related to the scandalous claims Jesus made about himself.<sup>50</sup>

Jesus claimed to be the Messiah – the long-awaited king of God's people, and he also indicated that he was divine.<sup>51</sup> The Bible describes several occasions when Jesus' Jewish opponents sought to take his life.<sup>52</sup> On one occasion, his enemies were very plain about why they wanted him dead: they considered him a blasphemer.

The Jews who were there gathered around him, saying, "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly." Jesus answered, "I did tell you, but you do not believe. ... **I and the Father are one.**" Again his Jewish opponents picked up stones to stone him, but Jesus said to them, "**I have shown you many good works from the Father. For which of these do you stone me?**" "**We are not stoning you for any good work,**" they replied, "**but for blasphemy, because you, a mere man, claim to be God.**"<sup>53</sup>

After Jesus' betrayal and a late night arrest, he was quickly sentenced to death under Jewish law. He was then relayed to the civil authorities: Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, and Herod Antipas, the Jewish client king. The whole process was witnessed by people who followed Jesus and by people who were hostile or indifferent to him.

Jesus was held under armed guard. Many of his disciples fled for their lives, while others watched helplessly as his sentencing went ahead.

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<sup>50</sup> See previous section, 'Jesus claimed authority to forgive sins'

<sup>51</sup> John 8:58

<sup>52</sup> See Mark 14:60-64

<sup>53</sup> John 10:25-33

Passed from the Temple authorities to Roman soldiers, Jesus was executed the following morning. Six hours later, and witnessed by the public crowds, Jesus was confirmed dead by his executioners. They removed his body, and it was later placed under armed guard in the tomb of a sympathiser, Joseph of Arimathea.

## God raised Jesus from the dead, and he ascended into heaven

The very earliest Christian accounts of Jesus all agree that he not only died on the cross, but after three days was raised to life again:

**We are witnesses** of everything he did in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They killed him by hanging him on a cross, but **God raised him from the dead on the third day and caused him to be seen.**<sup>54</sup>

Jesus' first disciples regarded his death and resurrection as the peak of his earthly ministry. This was unusual, to say the least.

Jesus' first disciples were ethnic Jews. From their youth, they would have learned from the Torah that death on a cross was a shameful thing, associated with God's curse.<sup>55</sup> What had compelled them to preach a crucified Messiah? The simple answer is that Jesus was precisely the Messiah about whom the Torah, the Prophets and the Psalms all testified.<sup>56</sup> But **Jesus was not the Messiah many expected.** It was his death, not a military campaign, which would establish his kingdom and bring freedom to his people.<sup>57</sup>

The Messiah would 'give his life as a ransom for many'.<sup>58</sup> Just as the Prophet Isaiah had anticipated centuries before, Jesus' innocent death on the cross would be a final sacrifice to free his people – not from Rome, but from the curse and the penalty of sin:

But he was pierced for our transgressions,  
he was crushed for our iniquities;  
the punishment that brought us peace was on him,  
**and by his wounds we are healed.**<sup>59</sup>

This was a strange message to first-century ears. Jesus' disciples knew it sounded like foolishness to Jews, Greeks and Romans alike. After all, what great king, chosen by God, could die in such an appalling way?

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54 Acts 10:39-40

55 Deuteronomy 21:23

56 See <https://jewsforjesus.org/answers/top-40-most-helpful-messianic-prophecies/>

57 John 12:32-33. For two hundred years or so prior to Jesus, many Jews, but not all, began to look for a military liberator from Gentile rule; in doing so they were ignoring what Isaiah the prophet said about the Messiah: that he would be a Suffering Servant.

58 Mark 10:45

59 Isaiah 53:5



The disciples spoke of the ‘scandal of the cross’<sup>60</sup> yet travelled far and wide to tell about their crucified Messiah. Why? Because the cross was the very place where Jesus had won his great victory. Referring back to the Prophet Isaiah, Jesus’ close disciple Peter explained Jesus’ accomplishment:

He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; **by his wounds you have been healed.**<sup>61</sup>

## Jesus died for us, so that we may have everlasting life

In his death, Jesus’ innocent sacrifice promises freedom from the punishment for sins and reconciliation with God for everyone who truly accepts it.<sup>62</sup> During his ministry, Jesus remarked that ‘anyone who sins is a slave to sin’ – and being a slave to sin leaves us outside God’s family.<sup>63</sup> That’s bad news. After all, who among us can claim to have never sinned?

Jesus alone was without sin.<sup>64</sup> And he claimed his innocent death would free us from our sins, reconciling us to God:

“... the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and **to give his life as a ransom** for many.”<sup>65</sup>

“Very truly I tell you, anyone who sins is a slave to sin. Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever. So **if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.**”<sup>66</sup>

This was what Jesus’ disciples celebrated. By his life and death, Jesus the Son of God made a way for us to be forgiven and reconciled to God.<sup>67</sup> Like runaway children restored to a loving parent, we are not cut off from our Father’s affection or His inheritance.

**Jesus was crucified to bear our punishment, cancel our terrible debt and restore us to God.** It was costly for him – but it is good news for us!

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60 Greek: *skandalon tou staurou*. See 1 Corinthians 1:23; Galatians 5:11

61 1 Peter 2:24

62 Galatians 2:1-10

63 John 8:34-35

64 John 8:46; 1 John 2:1

65 Matthew 20:28

66 John 8:34-36

67 Galatians 4:6-7; 2 Corinthians 5:19-21

## Islamic Perspective

### The disbelieving Jews plotted to kill Jesus, and tried to seize him


Why was Jesus sentenced to death? The Qur'an<sup>68</sup> implies the Jews were responsible. The explanation is simple: they envied Jesus' miracles and prophethood. Ibn Kathir writes<sup>69</sup>,

... the Jews, may Allah's curses, anger, torment and punishment be upon them, envied him because of his prophethood and obvious miracles; curing the blind and leprous and bringing the dead back to life, by Allah's leave. He also used to make the shape of a bird from clay and blow in it, and it became a bird by Allah's leave and flew. ... and they [the Jews] went to the king of Damascus at that time, a Greek polytheist who worshipped the stars. They told him that there was a man in Bayt Al-Maqdis misguiding and dividing the people in Jerusalem and stirring unrest among the king's subjects. The king became angry and wrote to his deputy in Jerusalem to arrest the rebel leader, stop him from causing unrest, crucify him and make him wear a crown of thorns.

Seeing his many impressive miracles, Jesus' Jewish opponents were jealous and wanted him dead. So they went to the king of Damascus who wrote to pronounce a sentence of crucifixion and a crown of thorns for Jesus.

### God raised Jesus before his enemies could seize him

Jesus' mission was to bring signs for the Children of Israel (the Jews) – but he had become aware of their disbelief and rejected them:<sup>70</sup>

وَمُصَدِّقًا لِمَا بَيَّنَّتْ يَدَىٰ مِنَ التَّوْرَةِ وَلَا أُحِلَّ لَكُمْ  
بَعْضَ الَّذِي حُرِّمَ عَلَيْكُمْ وَجِئْتُمْ بِبَيِّنَةٍ مِّن رَّبِّكُمْ  
فَأَتَوْا اللَّهَ وَأَطِيعُوا 

And will make him a messenger to the Children of Israel, (saying): I come unto you with a sign from your Lord. [ . . . ] **But when Jesus became conscious of their disbelief, he cried: Who will be my helpers in the cause of Allah? The disciples said: We will be Allah's helpers.**

We believe in Allah, and bear you witness that we have surrendered (to Him). Our Lord! We believe in that which You have revealed and we follow him whom You have sent. Enrol us among those who witness (to the truth).<sup>71</sup>

68 Sura 4:157

69 Tafsir Ibn Kathir, 4:157 - <https://bit.ly/2qQ7qNj>

70 Sura 3:54

71 Sura 3:49-53

The Qur'an describes how Jesus' Jewish enemies searched for him so they might crucify him. They schemed against Jesus. But Allah's rescue plan was greater...

وَمَكُرُوا وَمَكَرَ اللَّهُ وَاللَّهُ خَيْرُ الْمَكْرِينَ

And they (the disbelievers) schemed, and Allah schemed (against them): and Allah is the best of schemers. (And remember) when **Allah said: O Jesus! I am gathering you and causing you to ascend to Me**, and am cleansing you of those who disbelieve and am setting those who follow you above those who disbelieve until the Day of Resurrection. Then to Me you will (all) return, and I shall judge between you as to that in which you used to differ.<sup>72</sup>

What was the scheme by which Allah would subvert Jesus' enemies? Allah simply found another to take Jesus' place on the cross.

### Allah schemed against Jesus' enemies, and another person died in Jesus' place

After Jesus' enemies arrived to arrest him, a miracle took place. The person Jesus' enemies believed to be him was found to be another person altogether. This was because Allah had transformed another person to resemble Jesus.<sup>73</sup> This person was taken away in his place, and the resemblance was so great that all those who sentenced him were convinced he was Jesus. In his tafsir on Sura 3:154, Ibn Kathir explains:

Ibn Abi Hatim recorded that Ibn `Abbas said, **“Just before Allah raised `Isa to the heavens, `Isa went to his companions, who were twelve inside the house. ... He then asked, `Who volunteers that his image appear as mine, and be killed in my place. He will be with me (in Paradise)’** One of the youngest ones among them volunteered ... `Isa said, `You will be that man,’ **and the resemblance of `Isa was cast over that man while `Isa ascended to heaven from a hole in the house. When the Jews came looking for `Isa, they found that young man and crucified him.**<sup>74</sup>

In this and other early Islamic accounts of Jesus being saved from the cross, a similar sequence of events is described. It shows that:

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72 Sura 3:54-55

73 Whether or not Jesus himself acted to bring about this substitution, Muslims consider it the will of Allah.

74 Tafsir Ibn Kathir, 4:157 - <https://bit.ly/2qQ7qNj>

- The Jews attempted to arrest Jesus
- Jesus appointed another to take his place on the cross
- The other person was transformed to look like him
- The other person was crucified in his place

There are different views about who took Jesus' place, and some traditions do not name the person. Some say it was Jesus' disciple, while others say it was one of Jesus' enemies whom Allah schemed against to resemble Jesus. Ibn Abbas (c.619-697) writes:

(And they schemed) they, i.e. the Jews, planned to kill Jesus, (and Allah schemed (against them)) **Allah wished to kill their man Tatianos: (and Allah is the best of schemers)** the strongest of those who have a will; it is also said this means: the best of Makers.<sup>75</sup>

Tafsir Al Jalalayn (c. 1459) similarly describes Jesus as being replaced by one of his enemies:

the one slain and crucified, who was an associate of theirs [the Jews], was given the resemblance, of Jesus. In other words, God cast his [Jesus's] likeness to him and so they thought it was him [Jesus].<sup>76</sup>

Shia tradition specifically names Judas, Jesus' betrayer, as the person crucified in his place.<sup>77</sup>

Whether it was a volunteer from among Jesus' disciples or one of his enemies, another person took Jesus' place on the cross. He escaped and was raised to Paradise by Allah. This was the scheme which undermined Allah's enemies: his prophet was saved from their efforts against him, and the shameful death which they sought to inflict upon him.

## Notes

<sup>75</sup> Tafsir Ibn Abbas, 3:54 - <https://bit.ly/2C4JubH>

<sup>76</sup> Tafsir Al Jalalayn, 4:157 - <https://bit.ly/368Mx02>

<sup>77</sup> Bihār al-anwar, 14, 338, 10: 'It is related in the tafsir attributed to Imam Hasan 'Askari that regarding the verse, and We strengthened him with the holy spirit (2:87) he said, "He is Gabriel, and this was when Allah raised him through a hole in his house to heaven, and **He cast his likeness on the one [Judas] who had desired to kill him, so he was killed instead** of him."  
- <https://bit.ly/36ixBfN>

## Comparison

It's helpful for us to use precise evidence to build a reliable picture of what's happened to Jesus. We must consider the witnesses as well as any archaeological evidence and the expertise of historians. Do these indicate whether Jesus was substituted?

### What did the first witnesses say?

The first witnesses to describe Jesus all agree he was crucified.

The first written accounts of Jesus' crucifixion are found in the New Testament, recorded by the first generation of Jesus' followers between 45 and 95AD.<sup>78</sup> They include accounts from at least three of Jesus' 12 disciples.<sup>79</sup> At least one of them had seen the crucifixion first-hand.<sup>80</sup>

In worldly terms, these disciples had nothing to gain and everything to lose by proclaiming this Jesus. Their message of a 'crucified Messiah' was bizarre to Jewish, Greek and Roman audiences, who mocked the idea that God's power should be demonstrated through a crucifixion.

Despite the ridicule faced by the young church, the earliest Christians were adamant Jesus had been crucified and that his death was of 'first importance' to Christian faith:

For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that **Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures ... he was buried ... he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and ... he appeared to Cephas [Peter], and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living...**<sup>81</sup>

### What was Jesus preaching?

If Jesus and his disciples were simply preachers of Islamic monotheism, as the Qur'an claims, there is little obvious reason why they were so hated by the Jewish authorities. After all, Judaism also insists that God is one, and that God alone is worthy of worship.<sup>82</sup> If this was Jesus' primary message, accompanied by a healing ministry, it would not have been controversial. **If Jesus was a simple messenger of monotheism, the Qur'an provides no explanation of why devout Jewish authorities sentenced him to death.** The Bible makes plain why Jesus' enemies sought to crucify him: he was considered a blasphemer.

<sup>78</sup> Some passages, such as 1 Corinthians 15, have even earlier origins. Reginald Fuller (1980) points out that New Testament scholars are "almost universally agreed" that this scripture dates to within two or three years of the crucifixion event itself.

<sup>79</sup> Peter, Matthew and John.

<sup>80</sup> John 19:25-27. John referred to himself with his usual self-effacing title, 'the disciple Jesus loved.'

<sup>81</sup> 1 Corinthians 15: 3-6

<sup>82</sup> Deuteronomy 6:4

In addition to the Bible, early and diverse writings from Romans,<sup>83</sup> Greeks,<sup>84</sup> Jews and Christians alike support the basic claim that Jesus was crucified and died as a result:

Our Lord Jesus Christ... 'was brought down to death.'  
- Clement of Rome (early Christian leader, c.96)<sup>85</sup>

Jesus, a wise man ... gained a following both among many Jews and many of Greek origin ... Pilate, at the suggestion of the principal men amongst us, condemned him to the cross ...  
- Josephus (Jewish-Roman historian, c.93)<sup>86</sup>

When did alternative theories begin to circulate? **It was not until a hundred years after Jesus' arrest – by which time all eyewitnesses, sympathetic and hostile, were dead – that people began to claim Jesus had only 'appeared' to be crucified.**<sup>87</sup> These reports emerged from a specific group of sects, the gnostics. One gnostic writing, dated to 200AD, assumes the voice of Jesus himself to 'correct' the testimony of earlier gospels:

For my death, which they think happened, (happened) to them in their error and blindness, since they nailed their man unto their death... It was another, their father, who drank the gall and the vinegar; it was not I. They struck me with the reed; it was another, Simon, who bore the cross on his shoulder. I[t] was another upon Whom they placed the crown of thorns... And I was laughing at their ignorance.  
- *Second Treatise of the Great Seth* (c.200 AD)<sup>88</sup>

**Claims like this were immediately and consistently rejected by the Christian church.**<sup>89</sup> But despite the firm rejection of such accounts, they continued to be passed on through the generations in regions including the Arabian peninsula.

**In the 21st century, a significant majority of scholars recognise Jesus' death as a factual and well-evidenced historical event.** Dr John Dominic Crossan, a leading non-Christian scholar on the historical Jesus, concludes, "that Jesus was crucified is as sure as anything historical can ever be."<sup>90</sup>

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83 See Tacitus' *Annals*, c.116AD [Roman writer]

84 "The Christians, you know, worship a man ... [who] was crucified..." – Lucian, c.165 AD [Greek author]

85 Clement, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, c.96 AD (quoting from Isaiah 53:8)

86 Josephus, *Antiquities*, c.93 AD [Jewish author]

87 The Gospel of Peter, a gnostic writing of the second century, also implies that Jesus escaped the cross, or at least, was unaffected by the wounds inflicted on his body. This is influenced by the belief that Jesus was a wholly spiritual being who only appeared to have a body.

88 Bart Ehrman, *Lost Scriptures* (2003, pp. 82–86).

89 'Basilides ... [has falsely claimed that Christ] did not himself suffer death, but Simon, a certain man of Cyrene, being compelled, bore the cross in his stead; so that this latter being transfigured by him, that he might be thought to be Jesus, was crucified, through ignorance and error, while Jesus himself received the form of Simon, and, standing by, laughed at them.' – Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* [I 24:3-4]

90 John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (1995)

## Early witnesses of Jesus' crucifixion

- New Testament contributors: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, Peter (Cephas), James, Jude and Paul
- Other early Christians: Clement, Ignatius of Antioch, Polycarp
- Early Jewish and pagan authorities: Josephus, Tacitus, Pliny the Younger, Suetonius, Lucian of Samosata, Municius Felix, Talmud scholars, Trypho and Celsus
- Eyewitnesses named in the Bible: [Christians] Andrew, Nathanael, James the Less, Judas, Philip, Simon, Thomas, Joseph of Arimathea, Mary mother of Jesus, Mary Magdalene, Mary of Cleopas, Barnabas; [Non-Christians] Pontius Pilate, Herod Antipas, Caiaphas, Joseph of Arimathea, Judas Iscariot and Simon of Cyrene

## Is the story detailed and coherent? Is there hard evidence to support it?

The earliest accounts of Jesus' crucifixion are clear, specific and unanimous in their description of how and why Jesus was crucified:

- **When:** It took place during the Passover festival in the Jewish month of Nisan, and during the first-century governorship of Pontius Pilate (26-36 AD). Jesus was arrested in the evening, tried overnight and crucified at 9am the following morning.
- **Who:** It was authorised by Jewish and Roman<sup>91</sup> authorities including Caiaphas, Pontius Pilate and a body of Jewish religious rulers, the Sanhedrin. Each of these groups, and the Jewish client king Herod Antipas, interacted with Jesus during his sentencing.
- **Why:** Jesus was convicted of blasphemy, having made himself 'equal with God'. To make the sentence stick, his enemies among the Jewish elites bore false witness. They claimed Jesus tried to incite violent rebellion against Roman occupation.
- **How:** Jesus was publicly crucified early in the morning during the Festival of Passover, at Golgotha, just outside Jerusalem. Around 3pm, 'the ninth hour' in the Jewish calendar, Jesus died. He was pierced to confirm his death. His body was taken down before the end of the day (sunset, or 6pm) and placed in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea. The tomb was then patrolled by the Temple guard.

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<sup>91</sup> In Roman Judaea at this time, only the Romans authorities carried out the practice of crucifixion; it was not a Jewish practice, and Jews were not permitted to carry it out.

These orderly, early accounts leave no room for alternative readings. They frequently mention Jesus' crucifixion, and bear witness to his "death on the cross."<sup>92</sup>

The Qur'an offers a different version of events. In contrast to dozens of biblical chapters which specifically mention the crucifixion, the Qur'an provides only two verses (Sura 4:157-158) to explain its alternative version of events:

- **When:** No information is given.
- **Who:** [The Jews] said, "We killed the Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, Allah's messenger."
- **Why:** No information is given.
- **How:** They did not kill him, nor did they crucify him; it only appeared so. The disciples have no knowledge of it except conjecture. In fact, Allah raised Jesus.

Muslim apologists argue the Qur'an did not need to say more about Jesus' crucifixion. Yet clearly, this account raises more questions than it can answer. It fails to provide any details of people, places or other descriptive details that one might expect from a reliable testimony.

The Qur'an dismisses the Jewish and Christian accounts of Jesus' crucifixion, claiming that they are mere 'conjecture' with no basis in knowledge. Clearly however, the Islamic version of events has generated much more internal dispute. Islamic writings, including a sixteenth-century gospel attributed to the disciple Barnabas, have promoted a variety of incompatible theories about how or why Jesus escaped the cross.<sup>93</sup>

Based on the earliest sources and their consistent version of events, there are good reasons to accept that Jesus was crucified. **Most secular scholars accept this as a historical event, consistent with the culture, customs, politics and religious climate of first-century Judaea.** It is also supported by hard evidence:

- The historical record confirms that crucifixion of insurgents was common in first-century Palestine. It took place outside Jerusalem in the days of Jesus' ministry.

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<sup>92</sup> Philippians 2:8

<sup>93</sup> For example, Tafsir Ibn Abbas (eighth century) claims Jesus was replaced by 'Tatianos', while later writings suggest Judas Iscariot, or Simon of Cyrene. Ibn Kathir claim Jesus appointed another to take his place voluntarily, whereas others claim it was one of his enemies who took his place on the cross and was transformed into his likeness.



- Artefacts confirm the existence of the individuals who sentenced Jesus: Caiaphas and Pontius Pilate. They include first-century non-Christian writings and archaeological finds. Archaeology also demonstrates that Christians were quickly recognised as a group worshipping a crucified Messiah.<sup>94</sup>

## Why did the crucifixion happen?

The Bible identifies Jesus' crucifixion as two things at once:

- A wicked decision brought about by human beings.
- An atoning sacrifice brought about by God's eternal plan, for all humanity.

At first glance, this is confusing. After all, how can we reconcile God's perfect plan with the death of the righteous Jesus?

This doesn't pose a problem for Christians, because the cross was not the end of the story. Jesus did not simply die. Rather, he rose again, showing that even death was subject to his unparalleled authority.<sup>95</sup> For Christians, the cross is not as shameful as it looks. Appearances can be deceptive. At the cross, God took the very thing Satan meant for evil and transformed it into an instrument of blessing and victory.

### Did the claim of crucifixion originate with Allah?

Where did the claim – that Jesus was crucified – come from? If the Islamic narrative is to be believed, it was Allah himself who generated the error.

It was Allah, we are told, who schemed against the Jews to convince them that Jesus was crucified. If so, Jesus' disciples and Christians down the centuries can hardly be criticised for believing it to be true. After all, the Qur'an insists that 'Allah is the best of schemers'. And yet, the Qur'an also states that those who differ from its account of Jesus' crucifixion will be subjected to 'severe punishment'.<sup>96</sup>

This presents a moral dilemma. How can Allah be just and truthful, and yet be the originator of an illusion which today influences billions of people? Is it right that people should be punished as "the worst of creatures" if their error was the result of Allah's scheming?<sup>97</sup>

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94 In 111 AD, shortly after the completion of the New Testament, the Roman senator Pliny wrote in passing of Christians, saying that they "were accustomed to ... sing responsively a hymn to Christ as to a god."

95 Acts 2:23-27

96 Sura 3:56-63


97 Sura 98:6

## Questions to consider

- Read Sura 6:164. Is it just for Allah to substitute another person in Jesus' place on the cross?
- Why did the disciples claim so consistently that Jesus was crucified? If they were mistaken, would Allah have notified them of their error?
- Should Allah condemn Christians for believing first-century claims that Jesus was crucified?
- Read Sura 4:157. Between Christians and Muslims, which group shows greater internal disagreement ('conjecture') about what happened to Jesus?



Notes



# DID JESUS DIE AT ALL?

## † Christian Perspective

### Jesus expected a painful execution, and went to it willingly

Jesus was not indifferent to the pain he would endure on a Roman cross. It troubled him. Crucifixion was notorious for its brutality. As Jesus awaited arrest, he did not play down the suffering ahead:

“Now my soul is troubled, and what shall I say? ‘Father, save me from this hour’? No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour. Father, glorify your name!”<sup>98</sup>

Jesus makes it clear: he did not expect to escape the pain of crucifixion, but nonetheless saw his crucifixion as an event which would bring glory to God.

Jesus strongly rebuked those who dismissed the possibility of his crucifixion. He foretold his death on several occasions, warning his disciples what lay ahead. But most of the time, they refused to accept that their beloved Messiah could die in this way:

**Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. “Never, Lord!” he said. “This shall never happen to you!” Jesus turned and said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block [skandalon] to me; you do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.”**<sup>99</sup>

Peter’s error reminds us that we must not reject Jesus’ crucifixion simply because it offends us. On the night of Jesus’ arrest, Peter made another mistake. Rather than heeding Jesus’ warning of his approaching death, Peter sought to prevent it by using his sword to attack one of the guards. Immediately, Jesus rebuked Peter:

“Put your sword back in its place,” Jesus said to him. “For all who draw the sword will die by the sword. **Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels? But how then should the Scriptures be fulfilled, that it must be so?**”<sup>100</sup>

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98 John 12:27-28

99 Matthew 16:22-23

100 Matthew 26:52-54

This is significant. First, Jesus claims authority to call down legions of angels from heaven for his own protection. Second, he says that he has decided not to do so, in order that the Scriptures be fulfilled. **Jesus could save himself, but chooses not to.** Why? Because Jesus' death was a *necessary* event: one by which God's plan of salvation, foretold in the Torah and Prophets, would come to pass.

## **Jesus was beaten, flogged, publicly crucified and confirmed dead**

Like all Roman crucifixions, Jesus' execution was a public event, staged as a warning to others. First Jesus was brutally flogged with a Roman whip. Then a crown of sharp thorns was fixed onto his head. He was mocked, beaten and marched to the place of his crucifixion.

This took place at Golgotha, just outside Jerusalem. Crowds attended under the watchful eyes of Jewish and Roman rulers. For nine hours, Jesus hung on the cross with nails through his hands and feet. He suffocated slowly; as his weakening arms gave way, he would be unable to breathe.

Jesus 'breathed his last.'<sup>101</sup> Not wanting to leave bodies exposed on a Jewish holiday, the Roman authorities ensured each of the men was dead. They broke the legs of the other men to hasten their death. They saw that Jesus was already dead, and thrust a spear into his side to make sure. He was confirmed dead and taken down for burial.<sup>102</sup>

## **Jesus was buried in a sealed tomb, under armed guard**

Joseph of Arimathea, a wealthy member of the Jewish Council who sympathised with Jesus, approached Roman governor Pontius Pilate to request Jesus' body for burial.<sup>103</sup>

With Pilate's consent, Joseph of Arimathea provided a stone tomb (his own family tomb) where the body could be given an honourable burial. The tomb was sealed with a heavy blocking stone, in keeping with Jewish custom.<sup>104</sup>

At the request of Jewish authorities, armed guards from the Jewish Temple were sent to protect the tomb, fearing Jesus' followers might attempt to steal his body.<sup>105</sup> These were the same Temple Guard who had successfully arrested Jesus and driven away his disciples; they were more than a match for anyone who might interfere with the tomb.

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101 Mark 15:37-39; Luke 23:46

102 John 19:34

103 Luke 23:50-52

104 Matthew 27:57-61; Mark 15:42-47; Luke 23:50-56; John 19:31-42.

105 Matthew 27:62-66

## Islamic Perspective

### Jesus was subjected to a painful crucifixion, for a time

In Sura 4:158 of the Qur'an, it is said that although Jesus' enemies thought him dead, he had been raised by Allah into Paradise.

Jesus was successfully seized by his Jewish enemies and sentenced to death. He was placed on a Roman cross, and suffered there for part of the day, but he did not die as a result. Rather, he fell unconscious, and was merely thought dead. He would later be revived and raised into Paradise by Allah.

### Jesus was publicly crucified, but not *confirmed* dead

This Islamic Swoon Theory maintains that Jesus did indeed experience the suffering of a Roman crucifixion. Commentators upholding this view even turn to the Bible's gospel accounts for reliable clues about what happened. Shabir Ally, the respected apologist, puts it this way:

There is some doubt in the gospels themselves as to whether Jesus actually died at the time when it was commonly believed that he died. **You see, nobody checked his pulse; nobody actually verified medically whether he was actually dead; they just presumed him to be dead. ... Crucifixion [means] to kill a person by means of crucifixion. It's not just the crucifixion itself, but it's a method of execution. So as a method of execution, it failed [to kill Jesus] on that occasion.**<sup>106</sup>

### Jesus was alive when they placed him in the tomb, and revived shortly afterwards

Shabir Ally points out that Jesus' experiences on a cross were not necessarily fatal. Instead, Jesus was buried in a tomb prematurely. At this point, Jesus needed only to be rescued from the tomb, by Allah or his disciples, before being restored to health.

The Bible shows Jesus' enemies requesting that his tomb be sealed, to prevent his disciples from stealing his body and further deceiving people. This implies that Jesus' enemies feared the disciples might stage a resurrection:

"Take a guard," Pilate answered. "Go, make the tomb as secure as you know how." So they went and made the tomb secure by putting a seal on the stone and posting the guard.<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> "Why Islam?" interview, 2013.

<sup>107</sup> Matthew 27:62-66

Reflecting on this passage, Shabir Ally considers why the Jews might have made such a request:

Now they're saying, 'Well, wait a minute, seal up the tomb because the next thing you know he'll come out of the tomb alive, and then they will say that he resurrected from the dead.'<sup>108</sup>

Considering these fears, there is reason to think the disciples succeeded in reclaiming Jesus alive from the tomb and helped him recover.<sup>109</sup> Jesus remained alive, and Allah would later raise him to Paradise.

## Comparison

The first written accounts of Jesus' life and death, the Bible's gospel accounts, claim that Jesus was crucified and died on the cross. This is the conclusion of several different New Testament authors, who provide many consistent and detailed accounts of the crucifixion. They explain not just what happened (the historical question), but why it happened (the theological question).

**The Qur'an contains only one reference to the crucifixion, but states two things emphatically about what happened. First, it claims Jesus was *not crucified*. Second, it claims he was *not killed*.**<sup>110</sup>

The Islamic Swoon Theory agrees with the Qur'an that Jesus was not killed on the cross. Yet it appears to differ from the Qur'an in one respect, since it claims Jesus *was* crucified:

- Swoon Theory: Jesus was *crucified*, yet not fatally
- The Qur'an: Jesus was *not crucified* at all

Despite Swoon Theory's novel interpretation and its controversial origin with the Ahmadiyya sect<sup>111</sup>, it has gained popularity among Sunni teachers such as the late Ahmad Deedat, Zakir Naik and Shabir Ally. Is it reliable?

### Does Swoon Theory contradict the Qur'an?

Shabir Ally argues that the Qur'an's reference to crucifixion in Sura 4:157 (wama salaboohu: 'they did not crucify him') means only that Jesus was *not successfully* executed by crucifixion.

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108 "Why Islam?" interview, 2013.

109 This theory is proposed by the apologist Ahmed Deedat, in his work, *Crucifixion or Cruci-fiction?* (1983)

110 In Arabic: 'wama qataloohu wama salaboohu'

111 See Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, *Jesus in India* (1899). Sunnis generally view Ahmadiyyas as non-Muslim heretics.

112 Standard definitions of 'crucifixion' throughout history are at odds with Ally's preferred meaning. Oxford English dictionary describes crucifixion as "an ancient form of execution in which a person was nailed or bound to a cross." The Bible shares this definition of crucifixion. It describes Jesus as 'crucified' long before the punishment killed him (Mark 15:25, 33-37).

However, this claim overturns the plain meaning of the Qur'an's plain statement, 'they did *not* crucify him', and changes the meaning of crucifixion itself to refer only to 'successful' or fatal executions.<sup>112</sup>

In effect, this interpretation twists the Qur'an to say, 'they did not kill him, *and* they did not kill him.' A more honest reading of Sura 4:157-158 should acknowledge its clear statement: that Jesus was *neither* killed *nor* crucified (nailed to a cross), but rescued by Allah.

In order to make their case, Swoon theorists must take several 'leaps of faith' regarding what happened to Jesus. Let's briefly consider these assumptions:

- **Was it possible to survive a Roman crucifixion?** There is no historical record of someone surviving a Roman crucifixion. Indeed, the practice was notorious for its severity and cruelty; so much so that the Roman word, *cruis* is the root of today's word, 'excruciating.'<sup>113</sup> So there is no sound reason to suppose Jesus survived such treatment. Jesus had been flogged with a Roman whip, forced to carry his cross, crucified and subjected to heavy bleeding, exposed and slowly asphyxiated for around nine hours before he was pronounced dead. Throughout these drawn-out agonies, he was under continual armed guard by professional Roman soldiers.
- **Was Jesus alive when taken from the cross, but misdiagnosed?** Swoon Theory claims Jesus was only unconscious, and not dead, when he was taken from the cross. However, there's no evidence for this in the earliest accounts. Contrary to Shabir Ally's speculative claim that nobody checked Jesus was dead ('checked his pulse'), the first witnesses note that Jesus' death was confirmed by Roman soldiers, professional executioners, who had thrust a spear through his torso. Again, contrary to Shabir Ally's claims, those Jewish authorities who ordered a guard of soldiers at his tomb did not question that Jesus had died.<sup>114</sup>
- **Did Jesus escape his tomb and recover?** According to Swoon Theory, Jesus was revived after his long ordeal, only to make a full recovery and escape the tomb. Such an escape would be implausible at the best of times. Jesus, after all, had been placed in a tomb sealed with a large, heavy stone used to deter grave-robbers. It was under armed guard.

**Were the eyewitnesses deceived, or wilful liars?** If Jesus was simply unconscious at the cross, then his pitiful 'resurrection' would hardly have been an inspiration to his followers. Met with this mutilated 'Messiah', Jesus'

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113 The Roman statesman Seneca (4BC – 65 AD) wrote about the cruelty of crucifixion in his *ad Lucillum*: "Can anyone be found who would prefer wasting away [in this way,] in pain, dying limb by limb, or letting out his life drop by drop, rather than expiring once for all? Can any man be found willing to be fastened to the accursed tree, long sickly, already deformed ... and draw the breath of life amid long-drawn-out agony? I think he would have many excuses for dying even before mounting the cross!"

114 Matthew 27:63

disciples would have had little reason to go about confidently announcing his divine victory, power and Messianic status. Yet this is precisely what they did for the rest of their lives, and most died for their testimony.

- **Did Allah protect his prophet?** Many Muslims are repulsed at the thought of a crucified prophet, and reason that if Allah is all-powerful, He can and should prevent such a dishonourable and agonising death for his righteous messengers. Yet Swoon Theory does not resolve this problem. It maintains that Jesus still suffered the full agonies of crucifixion. If the Swoon Theory is to be believed, this did not accomplish anything besides the torture of a prophet and the propagation of a lie: that Jesus had died for the sins of his people, and risen from the dead.

In addition to relying on a series of implausible assumptions, the credibility of Swoon Theory is significantly weakened by its reliance on late, rejected folk tales and distorted readings of the early witnesses. For example, Ahmed Deedat has skewed the gospel accounts to present Jesus as a “miscalculating” revolutionary who fought his arrest:

[Prior to his arrest,] Jesus does not take the eight with him to pray. He positions them strategically at the entrance to the courtyard; armed to the hilt...<sup>115</sup>

Even a basic knowledge of the gospel accounts will expose flaws in such arguments. Famously, Jesus sternly rebuked those who tried to take up arms in his defence.<sup>116</sup>

**Fundamentally, Swoon Theory presents many irresolvable problems. Most non-Muslim scholars, and many Muslims too, reject it on theological or historical grounds.** The opposing claim – that Jesus was crucified under Pontius Pilate, and died as a result – is far more consistent with the Bible, with modern scholarly consensus, and with all the facts available.

## ? Questions to consider

1. Read Matthew 16:22-23 and Mark 8:31-33. How did Jesus' disciples initially respond to the idea of a crucified Messiah?
2. Why did Jesus' disciples give their lives to preaching about a crucified Messiah?
3. What evidence is there to support the idea that Jesus swooned?
4. If Jesus was crucified, but not killed, why did Allah allow this to happen at all?

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115 Ahmed Deedat, *Crucifixion or Cruci-fiction?* (1983)

116 Matthew 26:52-54; John 18:11





## Notes

## What happened to Jesus?

Jesus' ministry on earth was controversial; we can all agree on that. The Bible and the Qur'an both tell us Jesus' opponents schemed to put him to death. Clearly, something about Jesus' claims, or his miraculous deeds, offended the religious authorities.

But the question remains: why did Jesus' enemies seek to crucify him? And what happened next?

We have established that:

- The Bible specifically identifies the charge against Jesus as one of blasphemy. Jesus had offended the Jewish religious authorities because he 'claim[ed] to be God'.<sup>117</sup>
- The first accounts of Jesus' death by crucifixion are early and many. The gospel accounts give a detailed, accurate version of events, backed-up by historians of the first and early second century. Most scholars today recognise Jesus' crucifixion as a factual event.<sup>118</sup>
- The first counter-theory about what happened to Jesus was advanced by the second-century Basilidians, who denied that Jesus had a mortal body.<sup>119</sup> Their bias, lateness, and lack of evidence cast serious doubt on their credibility.
- The Qur'an's sole reference to the crucifixion follows the Basilidians in stating that Jesus only 'appeared' to have been crucified. This claim finds no support among the first eyewitnesses.
- Theories that Jesus was substituted at the cross (Substitution Theory) or that he survived its agonies (Swoon Theory) interpret the event theologically as part of Allah's plan against Jesus' Jewish opponents.<sup>120</sup> No reason is given as to why this was necessary.
- The gospel accounts say Jesus' crucifixion was no accident of history but part of God's plan, to bring those who trust in Jesus into his Paradise. This was anticipated centuries before, by God's prophets, the Torah (Tawrat) and Psalms (Zabur).<sup>121</sup>

Biblical claims about Jesus – especially his divinity and crucifixion – have always sparked controversy. Maybe you're offended by these claims too. But feelings can be deceiving. **If you are uncomfortable with the Bible's description of Jesus, or the strangeness of crucifixion, or the shamefulness of crucifixion, this is not reason enough to deny that Jesus was crucified.**

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117 John 10:33

118 Good academic writings on this subject include Richard Bauckham's *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses* (2006) and Martin Hengel's *Crucifixion* (1977)

119 The gospel accounts are clear that Jesus had a human body; see Matthew 27:59; Mark 14:8; John 20:27.

120 Sura 3:49-54

121 See Leviticus 17:11; Psalm 22; Isaiah 53

Consider Peter, Jesus' close disciple. After Jesus predicted his crucifixion, Peter was horrified at the idea, declaring 'this will never happen to you!' But Peter had to follow the evidence where it led him. He later became one of the most vocal witnesses of 'Christ crucified'.<sup>122</sup>

**The Bible teaches that Jesus' crucifixion was not a defeat, but a victory.**

It was not a mark of God's negligence, but of his amazing compassion for humanity. Like every one of us, Jesus would die. But unlike the rest of us, Peter pointed out, 'it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him'.<sup>123</sup>

Jesus rose again, conquering death and the curse of sin that brings death to us all.<sup>124</sup> He invites all of us who trust him to share in his victory:

"For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day."<sup>125</sup>

For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.<sup>126</sup>

## Your decision

[The risen Jesus] said to them, "This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms." Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. He told them, "This is what is written: The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem."<sup>127</sup>

Christians and Muslims agree that no one can go to Paradise unless their sins are forgiven. Jesus claims to forgive sin. He has taken our place in death, 'to give his life as a ransom for many'.<sup>128</sup>

Jesus paid the debt of our sins in full. If we trust in him, we will be with him in Paradise. This is good news!

And this is that testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son.<sup>129</sup>

Will you believe in this Jesus?

It is an important decision. One with consequences.

The decision is yours.

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122 Matthew 16:23; Acts 2:36; 4:10

123 Acts 2:24

124 Genesis 2:17; 1 Corinthians 15:22

125 John 6:40

126 Romans 6:23

127 Luke 24:44-45

128 Mark 10:45

129 1 John 5:11

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**H**ave you ever wondered why you believe what you believe? How do you know what you believe is true? Is it just a leap of faith or can it be verified with evidence?

It's important to examine what we believe. Eternity depends on it! If you are sure that what you believe is true then there should be no fear of examining it more closely.

In this booklet the Christian and Islamic views of Jesus are compared and contrasted. Since the first century the Bible has described Jesus as having been crucified, buried and resurrected under Pontius Pilate. The Qur'an denies Jesus' death by crucifixion. But is there evidence to establish what really happened to Jesus? Is the Qur'an justified in denying Jesus' death by crucifixion?

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