

Did Jesus really die? (Part 1)

Catholics and Protestants alike often attribute to Jesus ideas that he never taught and which are not found in the Holy Bible. The creation of monasteries, the ceremony of Confirmation, the confession of sins to a priest, and the “sacrament” of “extreme unction” (anointing the dying with oil) are examples of non-biblical practices, of which many others could be mentioned. These practices, which were unknown to Christians for centuries, have now become fundamental parts of the faith of millions of people and are seldom questioned. In the same way, the majority of Muslims accept as articles of faith certain ideas and practices, never suspecting that these things were not taught by the one they consider to be the last prophet of Allah. This phenomenon actually explains part of the division between Christians and Muslims: in the course of time men have added doctrines which take them farther away from the Truth and which also put more distance between Christianity and Islam.

We all know that the central message of Christianity is based on three historical events: 1) Jesus Christ died on a cross; 2) he was buried; 3) three days later he was rose from the dead—he was resurrected. Most Muslims, however, deny the crucifixion of Jesus. Do they deny it because Muhammad actually said that the crucifixion did not take place? Or is this idea instead one of those beliefs that came along much later?

A KEY VERSE FROM THE QUR'AN

When we ask our Muslim friends about this point, they always refer us to the same Qur'anic verse: Surah 4:156-158 – *An-Nisa'*. In this passage Allah says that he had sealed the hearts of the Jews

“on account of their denial of the truth. Except for a few of them, they have no faith. They denied the truth and uttered a monstrous slander against Mary. They declared, ‘We have put to death the Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary, the Messenger of God.’ They did not kill him, nor did they crucify him, but it only seemed to them [as if it had been so]. And those who differ in this matter are in doubt concerning it. They have no definite knowledge about it, but only follow mere conjecture. But they certainly did not kill him.”

A great many explanations of this passage have been suggested. Some say that an angel protected

Jesus or that he hid himself in a niche in the wall, while the soldiers laid their hands on one of his disciples, who was killed in his place. Others say that Simon of Cyrene, the Jewish passerby who was forced to carry the cross of Jesus, was then crucified instead of Christ. Many, including the so-called “Gospel of Barnabas” claim that God changed the appearance of Judas, the traitor, miraculously making him look like Jesus so that he would be crucified in his place. In fact, although the details vary widely, most explanations include the idea that God intervened to change the appearance of someone and make people think that they were killing Jesus, when it was actually another person. Ahmad Deedat, a South African Muslim who wrote a book on this subject, claimed that Jesus actually was nailed to the cross, but that he did not die. Deedat said that Jesus fainted and people wrongly thought that he had died; when he had been laid in the coolness of the tomb, he supposedly woke up. Still others say that there was not even a crucifixion at all; they say that the story of the death of Jesus was entirely fabricated.

PROBLEMS WITH THE USUAL EXPLANATIONS

All these explanations have certain problems. There is, for example, a moral problem if we say that God used trickery or deception to deliberately make people believe a lie. God is perfectly holy, pure and without sin. The Bible clearly says in Hebrews 6:18 that “it is impossible for God to lie,” and Titus 1:2 that God “cannot lie.” He commanded in the Law of Moses: You shall not “deal falsely, nor lie to one another” (Leviticus 19:11). Would He who commanded men not to use deception try Himself to deceive men? How could He be trusted from then on? Far be it from God, the God of Truth—far be it from Him to deceive men and make them believe falsehoods. You must realize that if Allah had deceived men in order to make them believe that Jesus died on the cross, he would be responsible for having invented one of the fundamental doctrines of Christianity. He would be both a liar and one who helps to establish false religions. May He forgive men who have suggested such a thing. God would not use His miraculous power to deceive men. Satan is the one who does such things. Let us not dishonor God.

On the other hand, is it possible to believe that, without any miraculous intervention on God's part, someone else could really be crucified and buried in

the place of Jesus? While he was on the cross he was recognized by the Roman centurion and his soldiers, the passersby who heard him preach, the Jewish leaders, and the two criminals who were crucified on either side of him. There were also those who knew him intimately: the women who had accompanied him from Galilee, his own mother and his disciple, John. His body must have been easily recognizable after it was taken down from the cross, not only by his face, but also by the scars from the crown of thorns that the soldiers had placed on his head. Besides, Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, who buried him, as well as the women who were watching as the body was prepared for burial, all knew Jesus very well. Without a miraculous deception, they could not have mistaken someone else for Jesus.

What about Ahmad Deedat's idea that Jesus was indeed crucified, but that he did not die? According to this theory, Jesus just fainted and then was revived later on in the coolness of the tomb. People mistakenly thought he was dead, and when they saw him alive a few days later, they proclaimed that he had been resurrected.

Let us be honest and realistic: Jesus actually died. Before his crucifixion, He had been severely beaten by "experts." Roman soldiers knew perfectly well how to use their scourges, leather whips with pieces of glass and sharp stones woven into them, to bruise the entire body and leave the skin hanging in bloody strips (it is said that a person's back would resemble ground meat). They had mastered their method of execution, one of the cruelest ever invented by man, producing suffocation and a slow, agonizing death. They knew how to determine if their victim was dead. And in the case of Jesus, they also pierced his side with a spear. "But when they came to Jesus and saw that He was already dead, they did not break His legs. But one of the soldiers pierced His side with a spear, and immediately blood and water came out" (John 19:33,34). It should be added that Jesus was buried according to Jewish custom: "And Nicodemus, who at first came to Jesus by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about a hundred pounds. Then they took the body of Jesus, and bound it in strips of linen with the spices, as the custom of the Jews is to bury" (John 19:39,40).

Even if one supposed that Jesus had not died but had only fainted, how could he have survived for three days in a damp tomb with no food, water or

medical attention, severely wounded, wrapped like a mummy in several meters of cloth attached with nearly 100 pounds of sticky spices? How would he have had the strength to free himself from the strips of cloth, roll away the gigantic stone from the entrance of the tomb, overpower the soldiers who were guarding it, walk for several miles on feet that had been pierced with nails, and then present himself to his disciples in a state that would convince them that he was the Lord of life? Mr. Deedat's version just does not hold up.

NO SUPPORT IN THE HADITHS

In light of the opposition of the overwhelming majority of Muslims today, it is very interesting to learn that most reputable collections of Hadiths, that of Sahih al-Bukhari and that of Sahih Muslim, are totally silent on the question of the crucifixion. Those who read the Hadiths know quite well that they often speak of questions that such and such disciple of the prophet asked him and of the answers he gave. Sometimes the questions concern the meaning of particular Koranic verses. It is strange then, when one thinks of the divergent views held by Muslims today on the meaning of the 40 Arabic words that make up Surah 4:157, that of all the stories preserved during the first two hundred years following the life of Muhammad, none of them refer to one of his disciples asking him about the crucifixion of Jesus or the meaning of this verse. That means that there is no truly credible support for the usual explanations that we have seen for this passage in the Qur'an.

Let us summarize:

- Some say that God substituted someone in the place of Jesus, but they do not agree on who it was on the cross—Simon of Cyrene? Judas? Peter? An unknown Jew? We don't know.
- Some say that neither Jesus nor someone resembling him was crucified.
- Some say that Jesus escaped and went to India, where he died many years later of a natural death.
- Some say that Jesus was crucified but that he did not die as a result. He was revived in the tomb.
- Some say that God took him away to heaven before he could be arrested, others that it was after he had been arrested and beaten and was on the way to be nailed to the cross, and others that he was taken to heaven years later.

Our text in the Qur'an says, "And those who differ in this matter are in doubt concerning it. They have no definite knowledge about it, but only follow mere conjecture." This is a perfect description, not of those who uphold the account contained in the Injeel, but of those who deny the crucifixion.

ANOTHER EXPLANATION OF THE VERSE

Do you know that there is another way to understand the Koranic passage we have read? This explanation does not come from Christians, but from Muslim scholars. The context of Surah 4:157 is a reproach addressed to the Jews who had rejected God's prophets, spoken against Mary, and boasted of having crucified Jesus Christ. In refuting the Jews, the Qur'an says, "They did not kill him, nor did they crucify him, but it only seemed to them [as if it had been so]." This does not mean that there was no crucifixion, but that, even though it took place, God was the one responsible for it. The Jews only did what God, the Almighty, allowed them to do for the fulfilling of His own plan. The same kind of language is used in the eighth Surah of the Qur'an, which speaks of the actions of the Muslims at the Battle of Badr: "You did not slay them, but God slew them; and when thou threwest, it was not thyself that threw, but God threw, and that He might confer on the believers a fair benefit; surely God is All-hearing, All-knowing." The Muslim faithful did, in fact, kill their enemies, but this was only, according to the thought in this verse, with the help and according to the will of Allah. In the same way, the Jew did play a role in the death of Jesus, but it was God who willed it and who caused his death to take place.