

Did Jesus really die? (Part 2)

According to the Qur'an, the Jews boasted in these terms:

“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.” (Surah 4 – *An-Nisa'*, aya 157)

We saw in our last article that the majority of Muslims think that this verse from the Qur'an means that God intervened in a miraculous way to keep Jesus from being put to death. He supposedly caused another person to look like Jesus and be crucified in his place. None of the hadiths support this interpretation, but it is very popular, in spite of the fact that it makes God out to be a deceiver who would be responsible for the invention of a Christian doctrine that Muslims consider to be false.

We drew the attention of our readers and listeners to a different interpretation of this verse in the Qur'an. The phrase “They did not kill him, nor did they crucify him, but it only seemed to them,” does not necessarily mean that the crucifixion did not take place, but that in fact, the Jews were not responsible for it—it is the sovereign God who was guiding events and fulfilling His own plan. This would not be the only place where Allah expresses Himself in such a way in the Qur'an. In Surah 8 – *al-Anfal*, aya 17, he is speaking to Muslims who had achieved a victory at the Battle of Badr. He tells them, “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” (Surah 8 – *al-Anfal*, aya 17).

WHICH INTERPRETATION FITS BEST?

Let us see if this way of understanding the passage about the crucifixion does not agree more with the facts than the usual explanations do.

The Character of God

We have already alluded to the idea that we detract from the honor of the perfectly holy and righteous God if we claim that he used his miraculous power to deceive humanity and make people believe a lie. Saying that God has purposely misled people in this way does not honor Him.

The Qur'an

The interpretation that we have proposed, according to which the crucifixion actually did take place, agrees best with the most natural way of understanding other verses in the Qur'an. For example, we read in Surah 19:33,34 – *Maryam* that Jesus said, “Blessed was I on the day I was born, and blessed I shall be on the day I die and on the day I am raised to life again.’ Such was Jesus, the son of Mary.” Considering what had been preached about Jesus for nearly six hundred years by that time, these words would naturally be understood as a confirmation not only of the death but also of the resurrection of Jesus. They certainly contradict the version which says that Jesus was taken directly to heaven when the soldiers came to arrest him and that he did not die.

Another passage which agrees more with the idea that Jesus actually died on the cross is found in Surah 3:55 – *Al-Imran*, which says, “When Allah said: O Jesus, I will cause thee to die and exalt thee in My presence and clear thee of those who disbelieve and make those who follow thee above those who disbelieve to the day of Resurrection. Then to Me is your return, so I shall decide between you concerning that wherein you differ.” In some translations of the Qur'an, Allah says to Jesus, “I will take thee.” According to a note in the translation of Maulana Muhammad Ali, it signifies “God took his soul.” Pickthall's translation is, “O Jesus, I am gathering thee”, and this is the Biblical idiom for causing to die. Yusuf 'Ali, in his first edition, translated the words as meaning I will cause thee to die. The point is that the Jews were not really responsible for the death of Christ—God is the One who willed it.

The writings of the prophets God had sent in earlier times

Islam teaches that one must believe in the prophets that God has sent to the world, all of the prophets. But those who claim that Jesus, the Messiah, was not put to death ignore what the prophets before Jesus had said and written about him. These messengers of God clearly predicted his humiliation, his suffering and his death.

Read, for example, what the prophet Isaiah wrote about the Messiah in chapters 52 and 53 of his book:

“See, my servant will act wisely; he will be raised and lifted up and highly exalted. Just as there were many who were appalled at him—his appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any human being and his form marred beyond human likeness—so he will sprinkle many nations, and kings will shut their mouths because of him. For what they were not told, they will see, and what they have not heard, they will understand.

“Who has believed our message and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed? He grew up before him like a tender shoot, and like a root out of dry ground. He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by mankind, a man of suffering, and familiar with pain. Like one from whom people hide their faces he was despised, and we held him in low esteem...

“We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth. By oppression and judgment he was taken away. Yet who of his generation protested?... He was assigned a grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death, though he had done no violence, nor was any deceit in his mouth.

“Yet it was the Lord's will to crush him and cause him to suffer...

After he has suffered, he will see the light of life and be satisfied; by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many.”

(Isaiah 52:13-15; 53:1-3,6-11; NIV)

This text dates from 700 years before the birth of Jesus, and we have a manuscript, or ancient copy, of it that precedes the death of Christ by more than a century.

The king and prophet David, in the Zabur, gave us the words of the Messiah which describe in horrible detail the suffering of the crucified one.

“My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me? Why are You so far from helping Me, and from the words of My groaning?...

“All those who see Me ridicule Me; they shoot out the lip, they shake the head, saying, “He trusted in the Lord, let Him rescue Him; let Him deliver Him, since He delights in Him!”...

“I am poured out like water, and all My bones are out of joint; my heart is like wax; it has melted within Me. My strength is dried up like a potsherd, and My tongue clings to My jaws; you have brought Me to the dust of death.

“For dogs have surrounded Me; the congregation of the wicked has enclosed Me. They pierced My hands and My feet; I can count all My bones. They look and stare at Me. They divide My garments among them, and for My clothing they cast lots.”

(Psalm 22:1,7,8,14-18, NKJV)

The same subject comes up in another passage from the Zabur:

“You know my reproach, my shame, and my dishonor; My adversaries are all before You. Reproach has broken my heart, and I am full of heaviness; I looked for someone to take pity, but there was none; and for comforters, but I found none. They also gave me gall for my food, and for my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink.” (Psalm 69:19-21, NKJV)

The various details described in these passages, we find them in the accounts of the eyewitnesses who saw Jesus on the cross.

Jesus, the son of Mary, who was, of course, a prophet himself, predicted numerous times that he would be arrested, mistreated, unjustly condemned and put to death by the Romans. He added, of course, that he would also be raised from the dead. When he had been resurrected, he said to his disciples:

“O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken! Ought not the Christ to have suffered these things and to enter into His glory?” And beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, He expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself... Then He said to them, ‘Thus it is written, and thus it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead the third day.’” (Luke 24.25-27,46).

Jesus himself predicted his own suffering and death. If his death did not take place as he said, then he was not a true prophet. But the Qur'an says, to the contrary, that he was.

Historical Testimony

In addition to the prophecies in the Torah, the books of the prophets and the Psalms concerning the death of Christ, in addition to the numerous passages in the Injeel which speak of it, there exist many historical testimonies from non-Christians in the first and second centuries confirming the fact of the crucifixion of Jesus.

A Roman historian by the name of Tacitus, born in 58 A.D., wrote concerning Christians, “This name comes from Christ, whom the governor Pontius Pilate, during the reign of Tiberius, delivered to the torturers.” The Greek author Lucian, born in the Roman province of Syria in the year 120, referred to Jesus as “the man who was crucified in Palestine because he introduced into the world this new sect.” Lucian denounced Christians for their loyalty to “that crucified sophist” under whose laws they lived. The Jewish historian Josephus, the Talmud (Jewish commentaries), the Roman writer Thal-lus—all of the first century—also confirm that Jesus was crucified. None of these writers was Christian, (most were hostile to Christianity), so they cannot be accused of acting out of self-inter-

est in providing testimony that supports Christian doctrine.

A HISTORICAL OR A THEOLOGICAL PROBLEM?

To tell the truth, the reason for interpreting Surah 4:157 the way the majority of Muslims do has nothing to do with proof that one might find in history, in the Bible or in the Qur'an. They interpret it as they do because of a theological preconception. Before even looking at the case of Jesus, they tell themselves that God would not allow his servant to encounter failure; now they consider the condemnation, the humiliation and the crucifixion of Jesus as a failure that would have prevented him from fulfilling his mission. They think that Allah will necessarily deliver his apostles from danger and make them victorious.

Those who think this way forget many passages in their own Qur'an which clearly show that Allah allowed many righteous men, including His prophets, to die at the hands of the rebellious and unbelieving. In speaking of the Jews he says in Surah 2:61 – *Al-Baqarah*, “And abasement and humiliation were stamped upon them, and they incurred Allah's wrath. That was so because they disbelieved in the messages of Allah and would kill the prophets unjustly. That was so because they disobeyed and exceeded the limits.”

In another passage it is written, “Those who deny God's signs and kill the prophets unjustly and kill those who enjoin justice— give them warning of a woeful punishment” (Surah 3:21 – *Al-Imran*).

Still another says:

“To Moses We gave the Book and sent a succession of messengers after him. We gave Jesus, son of Mary, clear signs and strengthened him with the Holy Spirit. But, whenever a messenger came to you with something which you did not desire, you grew arrogant, calling some liars and slaying others.” (Surah 2:87 – *Al Baqarah*)

(See also 3:112,181,183; 4:155; 5:70.)

The Qur'an also clearly shows that God does not always preserve the lives of those who fight for him: “And say not of those who are killed in the Way of Allah, ‘They are dead.’ Nay, they are living,

but you perceive (it) not" (Surah 2:154 – *Al-Baqarah*; see also 3.169).

Why then should it be said that Jesus could not undergo a painful death, killed by wicked men? Why should one hold to an interpretation that contradicts the Qur'an, history and the writings of all the holy prophets of God?

CONCLUSION

If your concern is to protect the honor of Allah, and you think that it would be degrading for the great King of the universe to admit that mortal men had succeeded in killing the one He sent, and

apparently in putting an end to his mission, think about this question: Which would glorify God more: to say that God helped Jesus to run away from wicked men, or to say that God allowed Jesus to be victorious over death by raising him up on the third day? Which one exalts the Almighty more: doing what looks like a magic trick to deceive men and help Jesus to escape death, or allowing Jesus to die and bringing him back to life after three days? What a wonderful proof of the power of God! Proclaiming the death and resurrection of Jesus does not dishonor God at all. Let us not hesitate to recognize the facts and to rejoice in them.