

Why do Muslims deny that Jesus was crucified?

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Most Muslim scholars today deny the historicity of the Crucifixion of Jesus based on literal interpretation of a Quranic verse.¹ This incurs the wrath of Christians and secular historians, who see it as an attempt to re-write history. It is one thing to hold an opinion or theological belief, but it is quite something else to meddle with the fabric of history. In this article, I shed light on the religious dispute about the Crucifixion of Jesus by tracing the origins of Crucifixion denial in the Muslim tradition.

The religion of Islam is founded upon three fundamental sources, namely the Quran, the biographies of the Prophet Muhammad, and the Hadiths. Everything that has been written about the religion of Islam is essentially an interpretation of these fundamental sources. Denial of the Crucifixion of Jesus is well documented in books written by traditional Muslim scholars. However, the Crucifixion of Jesus is mentioned only once in the fundamental sources. The reference to the Crucifixion is found in a Quranic verse addressing the Jews:

‘And because of their saying: We slew the Messiah Jesus son of Mary, God’s Messenger. They slew him not nor crucified, but it appeared so unto them; and lo! those who disagree concerning it are in doubt thereof; they have no knowledge thereof save pursuit of a conjecture; they slew him not for certain.’¹

Henceforth, I shall refer to this verse as the Crucifixion Verse. The verse raises several important questions. Was the Prophet familiar with the Gospel of Jesus Christ? If so, what did he mean by this verse? And how did explicit denial of the Crucifixion come to be the mainstream Muslim position?

There is ample evidence that the Prophet Muhammad was familiar with the essential features of Christianity.² There were many Jews and Christians living in the Arabian Peninsula in the seventh century CE, and they had access to religious scriptures, including the Gospel. Like many Arabs of his day, Muhammad made trading trips to Syria, which was under Byzantine Christian rule. These trips lasted weeks, and there was plenty of time to absorb the culture and religion of the Byzantines. Muhammad’s first wife Khadija had a cousin called Waraqa, who was a Christian and a close family friend, and we know that Muhammad spoke to him about Biblical scriptures. Around 615 CE, the Prophet sent a deputation of Muslims to Abyssinia to escape persecution in Mecca. The Prophet anticipated correctly that the Christian rulers of Abyssinia would offer asylum to the Muslims because of the similarities between Islam and Christianity, which indicates that he understood the essential doctrines of Christianity. Some of the Muslims who went to Abyssinia did not re-join the Prophet until 628 CE. On their return, the Prophet naturally would have asked them about their long

¹ Quran 4:157. Translations of Quranic verses are from Pickthall, Marmaduke. *The Meaning of the Glorious Quran*.

² For a short and critical biography of the Prophet, see *Muhammad: Prophet and Statesman* by W Montgomery Watt. For a more detailed and traditional biography, see *Muhammad: His Life Based on the Earliest Sources* by M Lings.

stay in a Christian country. In 631 CE, the Prophet received a delegation of sixty Christians from Najran. They had discussions over several days, and they touched upon many points of religious doctrine.

We should also recognize that whilst the Prophet did not agree with Christianity in its contemporary form,³ it is clear from the Quran that he acknowledged the authority of the Torah and the Gospel.⁴ The traditional Muslim view is that Jews and Christians corrupted their scriptures to the extent that they have no value, but this is inconsistent with Quranic teaching, and I will return to this topic later. The Quran says of the children of Israel, 'They change words from their context and forget a part of that whereof they were admonished,'⁵ which means they misinterpreted their scriptures and neglected important parts, but the verse does not detract from the integrity of the Torah and the Gospel. For this reason, even traditional Muslim scholars would have to agree that, prior to the revelation of the Crucifixion Verse, the Prophet must have accepted that Jesus was crucified. No-one who accepts the authority of the Gospel could possibly deny the Crucifixion of Jesus. The Gospel describes the Crucifixion of Jesus unequivocally. According to the Gospel, there were witnesses who spoke to Jesus while he was on the Cross. One of the witnesses was Jesus's own mother Mary,⁶ so there was no question of mistaken identity.

Next, we should consider how the Prophet would have reacted to the story of Jesus in the Gospel. We know that Muhammad considered himself to be one of a succession of prophets,⁷ and Jesus was the last prophet before him.⁸ He said that the prophets were spiritual brothers, and he felt a special connection with Jesus.⁹ The reasons for this are understandable. In his lifetime, the Prophet faced opposition, mockery, calumny, and persecution, but the Jews especially despised him. The Prophet felt that he could relate to Jesus, who endured similar treatment by the Jews of his time. However, there was an important difference between the Prophet and Jesus. The Prophet survived numerous plots and attempts on his life by the Jews, but meanwhile, Jesus was captured, tortured, and killed by the Jews. How did this make the Prophet feel?

The Prophet's beloved uncle Hamza was killed in the Battle of Uhud in 624 CE by a javelineer called Wahshi. A few years later, Wahshi converted to Islam, and the story of his conversion is curious. When he met the Prophet at his conversion, the Prophet asked him to tell the details of how he had killed Hamza. Afterwards, the Prophet forgave Wahshi, but he said, 'Alas, take thou thy face from me, let me not look upon thee again.'¹⁰ The story shows us that the Prophet was a tender-hearted person. He needed to know how Hamza had died for the sake of closure, but thereafter he could not bear to see Wahshi again because he knew it would arouse painful memories of his uncle's death. Jesus was the Prophet's spiritual brother, even dearer to him than Hamza. Therefore, we can imagine that the vivid details of Jesus's suffering in the Passion must have moved the Prophet to tears. His wife Aisha reported that if there was anything resembling a cross in their home, he would

³ Quran 5:72-73, 19:34-35.

⁴ Quran 5:48, 5:68, 10:94.

⁵ Quran 5:13.

⁶ Gospel according to John 19:25-27.

⁷ Quran 46:9.

⁸ Sahih Muslim, Hadith 2365b. Hadith references are from <https://sunnah.com>.

⁹ Sahih Bukhari, Hadith 3442.

¹⁰ Lings M, *Muhammad: His Life Based on the Earliest Sources*, p335f.

remove it.¹¹ Clearly, the Crucifixion of Jesus was a sensitive topic for him, and he did not like to be reminded of it. This also explains why we find no mention of the Crucifixion in the Hadiths, even though the Prophet often talked about Jesus's life and teachings.

The Crucifixion Verse should be interpreted in this context. The Jews were taunting the Prophet with obscene sarcasm, deliberately targeting him where they knew it would hurt. They killed his brother, and now they were gloating. We can only imagine the agony the Prophet must have felt. The Crucifixion Verse is an impassioned response to the Jews. The verse uses negative metaphors to express defiance and resolve. The Jews killed Jesus in the earthly sense but not in the spiritual sense. The sense of the Crucifixion Verse is found elsewhere in the Quran¹² and in the Gospel.¹³ I suggest the following translation of the Crucifixion Verse:

‘And because of their saying: We slew the Messiah Jesus son of Mary, God’s Messenger. They slew him not [rightfully] nor crucified [him rightfully], but it appeared so unto them; and lo! those who disagree concerning it are in doubt thereof; they have no knowledge thereof save pursuit of a conjecture; they slew him not [rightfully] for certain.’

The meaning of the verse is now clear. According to the Quran, the slaying and crucifying of Jesus was not rightful, and Jesus is alive in spirit. However, the Jews did not see it this way. They believed Jesus was a false messiah, and they believed it was right to crucify him. This is why Jesus prayed for the Jews in the Gospel: ‘Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.’¹⁴ However, the Jews were doubtful in their position. They had misgivings that Jesus might be the true Messiah, which meant that slaying him was not rightful. The Quran states categorically that slaying him was not rightful.

No-one in the Prophet’s time, including his opponents, understood the Crucifixion Verse to be a denial of the historicity of the Crucifixion. The Jews maybe realized that they had gone too far in their treatment of the Prophet, while the Christians were no doubt angry at the Jews and shared the Prophet’s sentiments. Today, when Muslims deny the Crucifixion of Jesus, they incur the wrath of Christians, and Crucifixion denial is prime fodder in polemics against Islam. Meanwhile, when the Prophet met the Christians from Najran, they discussed many aspects of religious doctrine and they had disagreements, but the Crucifixion of Jesus was a non-issue.¹⁵ The only rational explanation is that the Prophet never denied the historicity of the Crucifixion.

I have argued that the Crucifixion Verse is not a denial of the historicity of the Crucifixion. Let us now trace the origins of Crucifixion denial in the Muslim tradition. The traditional Muslim belief is that the phrase, ‘but it appeared so unto them,’ in the Crucifixion Verse means that someone who looked like Jesus was crucified instead of Jesus. The precursor to this belief is found in the polemical

¹¹ Sahih Bukhari, Hadith 5952.

¹² Quran 2:154, 3:169.

¹³ Gospel according to Matthew 10:28.

¹⁴ Gospel according to Luke 23:34.

¹⁵ Lings M, *Muhammad: His Life Based on the Earliest Sources*, p338f.

writings of the Christian priest John of Damascus, who died in 749 CE. In his book *Heresies*,¹⁶ John's reading of the phrase, 'but it appeared so unto them,' is that the Jews wanted to crucify Jesus, but 'they seized his shadow and crucified this.' John did not understand the context of the verse. He is mocking the Quran by adopting a reading that makes no sense. After all, how can you crucify a shadow? Nevertheless, it is notable that John's understanding that Islam denies the Crucifixion of Jesus is based on his reading of the Quran, but he does not say that Muslims deny the Crucifixion. He says that Muslims 'abominate' the Cross because they think it is a symbol of idolatry, but John makes no mention of Crucifixion denial among Muslims of his time.

John's attack on Islam was vitriolic, and it must have annoyed the Muslims. The Muslims had to respond to John. They especially had to respond to the bizarre claim that the Jews crucified a shadow. However, by this time, Muslims themselves were confused by the Crucifixion Verse because they found no explicit description of the context in the Hadiths. They thought that the Prophet removed the symbol of the Cross from his home because it was a symbol of idolatry, when the real reason was that it reminded him of the Crucifixion of Jesus. Under pressure to respond to John, we can understand the temptation of Muslims to say that it was not the shadow of Jesus that the Jews crucified, but rather it was a person who looked like Jesus. However, this was the beginning of a slippery slope for Muslim apologists. The idea that the Jews crucified someone other than Jesus contradicts the unequivocal accounts of the Crucifixion of Jesus in the Gospel. This put Muslims in a dilemma because the Quran recognizes the authority of the Gospel.¹⁷ The Muslims responded with exaggerated claims that the Christians had corrupted their scriptures. Thus, Muslims decided to re-write history so that it was consistent with their interpretation of the Quran. However, there has always been a minority of Muslim scholars who have affirmed the Crucifixion of Jesus and the overall integrity of the Gospels.¹⁸

¹⁶ Available online at orthodoxinfo.com/general/stjohn_islam.aspx

¹⁷ Quran 5:48, 5:68, 10:94.

¹⁸ Atai A, *The Crucifixion and the Quran*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=09-JthSnyic&t=2s>