

# The Crucifixion of Jesus in View of Muslim Theology

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It is commonly known, that the question whether Jesus was crucified and what significance the crucifixion has, belongs to the major points of discussion between Islam and Christianity. Whereas for Christianity a rejection of the crucifixion and salvation touches the centre of the Christian faith, in the Qur'ân the event plays only a minor role. Muslim theology nevertheless has made extensive comments on the crucifixion.

## The Crucifixion in the Qur'ân

The Qur'ân deals with the crucifixion of Jesus only in a single verse. Because of its ambiguousness this verse is the starting-point of all discussion about the crucifixion. Sura 4,157-158 reads:

“... and they (the Jews) have said, 'Verily we have slain Christ Jesus the son of Mary, the apostle of God'. But they slew him not, neither crucified him, but it seemed to them as if (or: he seemed to them to be crucified).<sup>1</sup> They did not kill him with certainty.<sup>2</sup> No, God took him up<sup>3</sup> unto himself”.<sup>4</sup>

It is interesting to note that the Qur'ân does not even mention or hint at the *meaning* of the crucifixion of Jesus as the salvation of His people. It is very likely that Muhammad, who came into contact with heretical monophysites and other Christian sects of his time, had never heard a true, biblical representation and explanation of the meaning of the crucifixion, which is therefore not to be found in the Qur'ân.<sup>5</sup>

From the Arabic terms used in this verse (“subbiha lahum”; “mâ qatalûhu yaqînan”), it is obvious, that it is quite difficult to prefer a certain translation, since translation means at the same time interpretation. From the wording alone, one can either think, that the Qur'ân defends the crucifixion and death of Jesus Christ or that it rejects both because of

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1 In Arabic: “subbiha lahum”.

2 In Arabic: “mâ qatalûhu yaqînan”.

3 In Arabic: “bal rafa'ahû allâh ilaihi”.

4 My own translation.

5 See the details in Jürgen Kuberski, *Mohammed und das Christentum*, Bonn, 1987.

the Arabic expression “subbiha lahum” (which means, “it” or “he” “seemed to them as if” or “he was made similar for them”). Several different interpretations have been given by Muslim Qur’ân commentators:

**1. Nobody was crucified:** Then Sure 4,157-158 means: it remains uncertain, what happened at the time of the crucifixion. The Jews aimed at crucifying Jesus, but “it seemed to them only as if” the crucifixion of Jesus had taken place. The Jews thought that they had crucified Jesus, but because of the darkness and the earthquake, which the Bible also reports, he escaped his execution and was in time raised to heaven by God. Only a minority of Muslim theologians advocate this opinion, that nobody was crucified.

**2. Jesus was crucified, but because of God's decree:** With the expression “subbiha lahum” could also be emphasized, that Jesus was crucified, but not because the Jews intended to do so, but because of God's own decree. The emphasis then lies on the first word “they slew him not” (but *God* caused his death and the Romans did the job). This opinion is today more an outsider's position in Muslim theology.

**3. Another person was crucified instead of Jesus:** A further interpretation of the expression “subbiha lahum” could be: It seemed to them as if Jesus was crucified. Then the verse would mean that Jesus was not crucified himself, but someone else; Jesus was either unintentionally mistaken for another person (this is today the opinion of the well-known Muhammad Taufiq Sidqî or of the great Si’ite theologian Muhammad Husain Tabâtabâ’î) or God transformed intentionally another person into the image of Jesus, so that he looked similar to Jesus and was crucified in his place.<sup>6</sup> Jesus was risen to heaven alive, but everybody thought, that Jesus was crucified himself (this opinion is for example defended in the classical Qur’ân commentary of at-Tabarî). This interpretation of Sura 4,157-158 is today in the Muslim world the most frequent one. But there are also many different opinions when it comes to the question, who was crucified in Jesus' place?

The so-called Gospel of Barnabas, a forgery from the late Middle Ages, claims to be the only true Gospel of Jesus Christ, but contains many Muslim doctrines which attack the Bible. This gospel has become very famous in the Muslim World especially since its translation into Arabic in the 20th century. It argues that having been made so similar to Jesus that the Messiah's own family and disciples considered him to be Jesus, Judas was crucified against his will in Jesus' place. Then Judas was led to the Mount of Calvary.<sup>7</sup>

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6 Louis Massignon has argued that this theory has a Si’ite origin: Louis Massignon, "Le Christ dans les Evangiles selon Ghazali." In: *Revue des Études Islamique* 6/1932. p. 523-536; p. 535.

7 A detailed study of the history and effectiveness of the gospel is part of my doctoral thesis: Christine Schirrmacher. *Mit den Waffen des Gegners. Christlich-Muslimische Kontroversen im 19. Jahrhundert, dargestellt am Beispiel der Auseinandersetzung um Karl Gottlieb Pfanders 'mîzân al-haqq' und Rahmatullâh ibn Khalîl al-'Uthmânî al-Kairânawîs 'izhâr al-haqq' und der Diskussion über das Barnabasevangelium.* Berlin, 1992, p. 241ff.

## Was Jesus Himself Crucified or Another person?

If Jesus was not crucified himself, then the question arises, who was taken in his place. Muslim theologians have given many different answers to this question, since the Qur'ân does not give any hint. Some classical Qur'ân commentators, as Zamaharî or Baidâwî, hold the opinion that one of Jesus' disciples, for example Peter, offered himself as “substitute” for his master, because Jesus had promised him paradise as reward. Others think, that Judas was chosen in order to pay for his betrayal. Various other ideas exist among Muslim theologians concerning this substitute: it could have been an unknown person, a Jew or someone being there accidentally, Simon from Cyrene, who carried the cross, Josua, the Jew Titanus, one of Jesus' guardians, someone who was created by God in this very moment, Satan (!), Jesus Barabbas, a Jewish Rabbi, one of the Roman soldiers or a criminal, who was involved in the matter by God.

Although there are famous commentators like Zamaharî, who reject the “substitution theory”, in modern times Muslim exegetes tend to prefer it. The substitution theory means, that someone has been crucified in Jesus' place, but everybody thought him to be Jesus, because God made this person to look similar to him, so that the eye witnesses had no doubt that Jesus himself was crucified. Most of the commentators hold the opinion, that one of Jesus' disciples (some give a name, others not) was the victim, while Jesus was still alive and taken to heaven, with his soul or with soul and body.

Consequently, Muslim Qur'ân commentators only agree concerning Sura 4,157-158, that Jesus could bring no salvation to mankind, if he was crucified at all.

## What Happened to Jesus?

The difficult expression about Jesus' crucifixion is followed by the Arabic term “mâ qatalûhu yaqînan” (“they did not kill him with certainty”). Again we find several ways of understanding this affirmation among Muslim theologians:

**1. Jesus was crucified, but did not die:** The contents of the expression could be, that the Jews did not really kill Jesus, who was crucified. Jesus did not die on the cross and was taken down alive. Consequently, the word “crucify” in Sura 4,157-158 does not mean automatically “to die on the cross”. Then there are different possibilities about what had happened to Jesus.

**2. Jesus was not crucified and therefore not killed:** Then the first sentence of the verse “they slew him not nor crucified him” means in the light of the second part: “they did not kill him with certainty”: they were certain of not having killed him.

**3. It was not clear, whether Jesus was killed:** “they did not kill him with certainty” means in this case, that nobody could be sure whether Jesus was killed or not. Then the question remains whether Jesus was crucified or taken up to heaven.

## Why Should God Allow Jesus Being crucified?

As we have seen, it is not clear from the Qur'ân text itself, what it really wants to say concerning the crucifixion. The only thing which is quite obvious, is, that the Qur'ân does not explicitly teach or explain the crucifixion and its consequences for mankind. Most of the Muslim theologians understood Sura 4,157-158 as a clear rejection of the crucifixion. But why do they fight the crucifixion so vigorously? Islamic dogmatics teach:

**1. Crucifixion means defeat:** If Jesus had really died on the cross, it would have meant the failure of his whole mission:<sup>8</sup> His disciples had forsaken him, Judas had betrayed him, Peter had disowned him and Jesus was dying without the visible success of thousands being converted or of the establishment of an empire like the Islamic one, which came into being already in the 7th century at the end of Muhammad's lifetime. Muhammad's political and religious success is considered as a real proof for his prophethood by Muslim theologians.

**2. Crucifixion means disgrace:** Such a disgrace as it would be to be nailed on the cross like a criminal would have been a death unworthy of a honoured prophet. God would be unjust, if Jesus had suffered like a wicked transgressor, and God would not have been on Jesus' side, since he did not rescue him in such a desperate plight. Western Orientalists thought, that the Qur'ân perhaps aimed at vindicating Jesus with the verse in Sura 4,<sup>9</sup> since the end of the verse reads as if Jesus was taken away from his persecutors: "God took him up to himself". Hermann Stieglecker summarizes:

“The idea of the Christians, that God could have humiliated himself to such a degree, that his enemies, the vulgarest mob, could mock, deride and illtreat him like an idiot or a fool and that he eventually suffered the most shameful and painful death like a criminal between two real criminals, that is an outrageous disgrace ...”<sup>10</sup>

**3. Also the Bible does not really support the crucifixion:** Muslim theologians took some of their arguments against the crucifixion out of the Bible itself and pointed at the fact, that also the Old Testament in Deut 21:23 teaches that the one who is hung on a tree is under God's curse. Consequently, Jesus could not have died on the cross, since he was a honoured prophet, and not a cursed criminal. Also the Gospels are used by Muslim theologians to show that Jesus' words on the cross “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” prove, that Jesus was crucified against his will (and not, like the Christians say, voluntarily). Additional to that, Jesus' cried in pain, and was therefore weaker than the two criminals who had not cried. How can he be the Son of God?

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8 This is for example emphasized by the Muslim author Ahmad Shafaat, *The Gospel according to Islam*, New York, 1979. p. 90.

9 So for example the opinion of James Robson, “Muhammadan Teaching about Jesus.” In: *The Muslim World* 29/1939, p. 37-54.

10 Hermann Stieglecker, *Die Glaubenslehren des Islam*, Paderborn, 2nd ed. 1983 (first ed. 1962), p. 315.

Another argument for the Muslim opinion, that Jesus was rescued before he could be crucified, is taken out of Hebrews 5:7, a verse Christians believe to be dealing with resurrection: “During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions, with loud cries and tears to the one who could have saved him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission” (God did not deliver him from crucifixion). In addition, the narratives of the gospels are so different and contradict each other so much that nobody can guarantee for the truth of the reports. One of the spiritual leaders of the Egyptian Muslim brotherhood (al-ihwân al-muslimûn), Sayyid Qutb, argues that none of the narratives of the gospel are recorded by eye witnesses, and therefore they are not reliable.

**4. The crucifixion and the representative salvation is intellectual nonsense:** Again and again, Muslim apologists pointed out: the death of a mortal man (since for Muslim theology Jesus is not God, but only a human being) cannot bring salvation or anything else for another human being. The fact that Jesus did not deserve his death, but suffered innocently, adds to this intellectual nonsense. The idea that Jesus has carried and taken away all sins of mankind makes it even more untrustworthy. It is not compatible with human intelligence.<sup>11</sup> (This is of course beyond logic: Muslim theologians have argued that Christian doctrines are not compatible with human intellect. But since in their eyes, only the doctrines of Islam are reasonable themselves, everything beside must be unreasonable and absurd).

**5. The idea of crucifixion has its origin in heathen religions:** Famous Muslim apologists like the well-known jurist Muhammad Muhammad Abû Zahra (1898-1974) who was teaching world religions at the traditional Egyptian centre of learning, the al-Azhar university in Cairo, or the historian Ahmad Salabî, who has done his doctorate of history in Cambridge, have “pointed out” that Christian dogmas like the trinity, sonship of Jesus or the Christian idea of salvation were not originally part of Christianity, but have been introduced by the apostle Paul, the one who corrupted Christianity after the death of Jesus. Such ideas, they argue, originated from the Roman-heathen environment of early Christianity and were taken into it like certain elements from Neo-Platonism and Judaism.<sup>12</sup> Ahmad Salabî and the most influential reform theologian of the beginning of the 20th century, Muhammad Rasîd Ridâ (1865-1935), hold that the idea of salvation through bloodshed originated in the heathen religions of Tibet, Nepal<sup>13</sup> or India.<sup>14</sup> Muhammad Asad, who was converted from Judaism to Islam after 1920, thinks the doctrine of forgiveness through the death of Jesus on the cross, may come from the Mithras cult. In any case, it was introduced into Christianity after Jesus' death.<sup>15</sup>

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11 This is argued by the reform theologian Muhammad Rasîd Ridâ in his Qur'ân commentary composed out of material of Muhammad 'Abduh and himself: *tafsîr al-qur'ân al-hakîm*, Cairo, 1911, Vol. 6. p. 26-27.

12 Such arguments are to be found at Muhammad Muhammad Abû Zahra, *muhâdarât fî-nasrânîya*, Cairo, 1966/3, p. 11.

13 Ahmad Salabî, *muqâranat al-adyân*, Vol. II. *al-masîhiya*, Cairo, 1965/2. p. 123.

14 Rasîd Ridâ, *tafsîr*, op. cit., p. 26.

15 Muhammad Asad (Ed.), *The Message of the Qur'ân*, Gibraltar, 1980, p. 134.

## **Higher Criticism Supports Muslim Apologetics**

It became already evident that Muslim apologists make use of the Bible in order to seek arguments against the crucifixion. Even more arguments are taken out of the theological literature of higher criticism of Europe, mostly from the 18th and 19th century. There is for example the theory that Paul falsified the original Christian teaching. In Europe (and especially Germany), many professors of theology at the universities collected bulks of material in order to prove that the Bible of the Old and New Testament is unreliable and especially historically untrustworthy. Muslim apologists have translated many of these theological books and used the arguments of (mostly) German professors, and so simply repeated the opinions of “specialists”, i.e., Christian theologians. Muslim theologians collected from the middle of the 19th century onwards whole encyclopedias of “contradictions, errors and mistakes” of the Old and New Testaments, and these works have been reprinted until today and used for attacks against Christian missionaries. Christian missionaries, who arrived in the Muslim world at the beginning of the 19th century, were not attacked with these differentiated arguments, but after the middle of the 19th century, Muslims made use of the arguments of Strauss, Michaelis, Eichhorn and other theologians of that time against the conservative missionaries.

When dealing with Jesus' crucifixion, Muslim theologians also go back to higher criticism of European theologians, who pointed out, that the biblical narratives of the crucifixion themselves report that a chaos and a great confusion emerged because of the darkness and the earthquake, so that nobody knew, what happened to Jesus. The narratives of the different gospels are considered to contradict each other and are therefore untrustworthy. One Muslim opinion, that Jesus survived his crucifixion, also gets its support from the so-called rationalism, the last epoch of enlightenment theology of the 18th and 19th century.

## **Christian Rationalistic Theologians Deny the Crucifixion**

One can see, that the older Qur'ân commentators are relatively cautious in deciding what happened to Jesus. Most theologians restrict themselves to emphasizing one part of the crucifixion verse: "They slew him not neither crucified him", but do not explain specifically what happened to Jesus. In modern Qur'ân commentaries this attitude has changed: The commentators explain more precisely what is meant by Sura 4,157-158. Most of them prefer the 'substitution theory', that another person has died in Jesus' place. Especially after the Arabic translation of the Gospel of Barnabas 1908, most Muslims accept from this so-called Gospel, that Judas has been crucified in Jesus' place. Also the theory that Jesus was crucified but survived crucifixion, did perhaps not emerge in Islam itself, but was possibly imported from Europe, since rationalistic theologians speak of a deathlike rigidity into which Jesus fell after crucifixion. He was revived afterwards because of the thunderstorm and the earthquake, and then invented the myth of his resurrection from the dead.

A few examples from rationalistic theology: Karl Heinrich Georg Venturini (1768-1849), a forerunner of rationalism, hints in his influential novel about the life of Jesus with the title *Natürliche Geschichte des großen Propheten von Nazareth*<sup>16</sup> (Natural History of the Great Prophet of Nazareth) at the possibility of a suspended animation. Karl Friedrich Bahrdt (1741-1792) formulates later in his work *Ausführungen des Plans und Zwecks* (sic) *Jesu* (Performance of the Plan and Purpose of Jesus):<sup>17</sup>

“... this is my opinion about the last part of the history of Jesus. Jesus had been put to death: he had suffered all tortures of an evildoer, all pains of death, but he also survived them - he came from death to life - and he came out of the grave ... on the third day after his execution - as somebody wholly restored and has shown himself to his disciples as somebody being revived ....<sup>18</sup>

These remarks of K. F. Bahrdt have been expanded by Heinrich Eberhard Gottlob Paulus (1761-1851) in his work *Das Leben Jesu als Grundlage einer reinen Geschichte des Urchristentums* (The Life of Jesus as Basis of a Pure History of Early Christianity):<sup>19</sup> Paulus does not speak of a swoon, but he calls the state of Jesus “dwindling of consciousness”, “rigidity” and “being dazed”. In this state Jesus was taken down from the cross. Paulus held that there was nothing unnatural concerning Jesus' life and death and was convinced that Jesus only did not move when taken down from the cross, but was not dead.

Many well-known German theologians like Daniel Ernst Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834) took over this idea, that Jesus being crucified does not necessarily mean that Jesus had died on the cross. It is possible that Muslim theologians also took up this theory out of the works of German theologians and included it in their theology.

## **Did Jesus Survive Crucifixion?**

The theory that Jesus survived his crucifixion, which was held by German rationalistic theologians, was especially defended by the so-called Islamic Ahmadiya movement, which is today considered as heretic, since the founder of the movement at the beginning of the 20th century claimed to be a further prophet, while Muslim theology holds, that Muhammad had been the last prophet in human history (“the seal of the prophets”). In numerous books and articles, the Ahmadiya movement proclaims the theory that Jesus was nailed to the cross, but only fainted, was taken from the cross while still alive and was revived in the cool grave with the help of special anointments. Then he wandered through Afghanistan to Kashmir in search of the “ten lost tribes of Israel”. He was

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16 Karl Heinrich Georg Venturini, *Natürliche Geschichte des Großen Propheten von Nazareth*, 4 Parts, Bethlehem, 1806/2.

17 Karl Friedrich Bahrdt, *Ausführungen des Plans und Zwecks* (sic) *Jesu*, Berlin, 1784-1793.

18 Ibid. Vol. 10/1786, p. 187.

19 Heinrich Eberhard Gottlob Paulus, *Das Leben Jesu als Grundlage einer reinen Geschichte des Urchristentums*, Heidelberg, 1828, p. 242-244+256-257.

married in Kashmir, died a natural death at the age of 120 years and was buried in Srinagar, Kashmir. At this place, people visit the grave of a certain Yuz Asaf as Jesus' grave until today.<sup>20</sup> Today, the theory that Jesus had survived crucifixion again experiences a renaissance on the German book market.

## Summary

The Qur'ân treats in Sura 4,157-158 the crucifixion of Jesus in a single verse. From the wording itself, it does not become clear, whether the verse generally denies the crucifixion of Jesus or wants to emphasize another aspect of it. Muslim theology categorically denies the crucifixion, but even more the Christian idea of salvation through crucifixion. Numerous arguments against it are taken out of the theological works of higher criticism of European theologians. There are different answers heard from Muslim theologians to the question, what happened to Jesus after the crucifixion? The theory of a substitute, perhaps Judas, who might have died in Jesus' place, is today a very well accepted theory. The Ahmadîya movement holds like German rationalistic theologians of the 18th and 19th century, that Jesus was crucified, but survived crucifixion, migrated to India and eventually died a natural death.

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<sup>20</sup> This theory is for example defended in the book by Mîrzâ Ghulâm Ahmad, *Jesus in India, being an Account of Jesus' escape from the cross and of his journey to India*, Oxford, 1978.