

# The Non-Crucifixion Verse: A Historical, Contextual, and Linguistic Analysis

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## Abstract

Over the centuries, there has been almost a consensus among Muslims and non-Muslims that the crucifixion of Jesus is denied in the Qur'an, mainly because of al-Nisā' 4:157. This overwhelmingly accepted interpretation has been challenged in recent times, albeit by a small minority of scholars, by suggesting novel interpretations of 4:157 and seeking support from history and

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other verses. This study first reviews how, from the early days of Islam, denying the crucifixion of Jesus was always seen by both Muslims and non-Muslims as the established Islamic view. It analyses the theological arguments of the minority view, promoted by some early Ismā‘īlī scholars and modern scholars, that the Qur’an does not deny Jesus’ crucifixion. A new attempt, which has been gathering some support, linking 4:157 to the Talmud is then critiqued. This study shows that the immediate context of 4:157 and the broader Qur’anic narrative also refute the new interpretation. A detailed linguistic analysis of the verse in question further shows that it cannot be reasonably read to mean anything other than rejecting that Jesus was crucified. In summary, history and a detailed study of 4:157 and related verses show that there is hardly any basis to justify challenging the centuries-long semi-consensus that the Qur’an denies the crucifixion of Jesus.

## The Consensus of Early Muslim Sources

There is only one verse in the Qur’an that directly addresses the crucifixion of Jesus:

And their saying, “We have killed the Messiah, Jesus, the son of Mary, the messenger of Allah.” They did not kill him (*wa-mā qatalūhu*), nor did they crucify him (*wa-mā ṣalabūhu*), but it was made to appear so to them. Those who differ over it are in doubt about it. They have no knowledge of it except the following of conjecture. They did not kill him with certainty.<sup>1</sup> (Al-Nisā’ 4:157)

From the early days of Islam, scholars of all persuasions—Sunnī, Shī‘ī, Mu‘tazilī, and Sufī—have accepted that this verse accuses the Jews of trying to crucify Jesus and *unambiguously denies* that they succeeded in doing that. The earliest meta-exegetical work of Abū Ja‘far Muḥammad ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923), for example, reflects this consensus. This is seen even in his commentary on the rather ambiguous root *w-f-y*,

which appears twice in the forms *mutawaffika* (Āl ‘Imrān 3:55) and *tawaffaytanī* (al-Mā’ida 5:117) with reference to Jesus. While another twenty-one occurrences of the root *w-f-y* in the Qur’an refer to death, the overwhelming majority of scholars have maintained that Jesus did not die. They have argued that his *wafāt* was a *wafāt nawm* (*wafāt* of sleep), rather than a *wafāt mawt* (*wafāt* of death). This interpretation derives support from two verses, al-An‘ām 6:60 and al-Zumar 39:41, where *w-f-y* refers to sleep.<sup>2</sup> Interestingly, even the minority opinion that Jesus experienced *wafāt mawt*, that is, he “died”, which al-Ṭabarī attributes to Ibn ‘Abbās and unnamed others, presumes that this death was not caused by the crucifixion.<sup>3</sup>

In his historical tome *Tārīkh al-umam wal-mulūk*, al-Ṭabarī quotes Wahb Ibn Munabbih (d. 114/732) on the crucifixion. The latter is known for introducing Jewish and Christian narratives into Islamic tradition. Indeed, his rather detailed narrative of the crucifixion is unambiguously a retelling of the Gospel story, although al-Ṭabarī does not note that when quoting it. It starts by mentioning Jesus’ anguish at the news that he was going to be killed (Matt. 26:39), before moving on to cover the Last Supper (Mark 14:17-25), Jesus’ prediction that Peter would deny him three times (Mark 14:29-31), the fulfilment of this prediction (Mark 14:66-72), Judas’ betrayal of Jesus for thirty Dirhams (Matt. 26:14-16), and details of Jesus’ arrest and the abuse he received as he was being led to be crucified (Matt. 27:27-38). Yet even this Gospel-inspired account concludes that “when they brought him to the wood log that they wanted to crucify him on, Allah raised him to Himself, and they crucified whoever was made to appear to them so”. When Mary and another woman were crying next to the crucified man, Jesus appeared to them and reassured them, “Allah raised me to Himself, and I did not experience other than good. This is something that was made to appear so to them.” So, even when al-Ṭabarī states that Ibn Munabbih said, “Allah *tawaffā* Jesus for three hours at daytime, then He raised him to Himself”, these words should be understood in the context of Ibn Munabbih’s claim that Jesus was not crucified.<sup>4</sup>

Al-Ṭabarī also mentions an obscure account about a tomb at the top of a mountain in Medina that someone claimed belonged to Jesus. The

headstone or footstone was written in an unfamiliar language that some Persians managed to read. It stated that it was the tomb of Jesus, son of Mary, whom God had sent as a messenger to the people who lived there. Significantly, even in this case, Jesus is said to have died, not been killed, so they buried him.<sup>5</sup>

If Muḥammad, and accordingly the early Muslims, had considered the possibility that verse 4:157 could mean that Jesus was crucified, we would have found at least a trace of this view. Yet there is none in Ḥadīth or exegetical, theological, or historical works. Had such evidence existed, there would have been no need for later Muslims to change this understanding anyway. After all, the killing of prophets is mentioned several times in the Qur'an, so the event itself would not have created any particular theological difficulty. This is not to mention the practical impossibility of removing all references to such an interpretation of 4:157.

## Muslim Consensus in Early Christian Sources

That Muslims denied the crucifixion of Jesus is also confirmed in early Christian sources. This is particularly significant because the Prophet Muḥammad is reported to have debated with Christians and Jews. For instance, on one occasion a delegation of approximately twenty Christians visited him in Mecca and the two parties discussed the old and new religions.<sup>6</sup> The Prophet and early Muslims must have regularly interacted and debated with people from the other two Abrahamic faiths, particularly in Medina. Had the Prophet and early Muslims entertained the possibility of Jesus' crucifixion, they would have shared this critical information with the Christians and the Jews. Such a major belief by Muslims about how Jesus' life ended would have been preserved in non-Muslim writings, as both Jews and Christians already considered the crucifixion an indisputable fact. The crucifixion is at the heart of Christian theology, so Christians would have been particularly keen on recording the slightest indication that Muslims may accept that Jesus was crucified. It would have been impossible for this historical Muslim belief and compromise to have gone unmentioned by early Christian writers

and polemicists. Yet, all surviving early Christian writings presume that Muslims denied Jesus' crucifixion.

The earliest *possible* Christian reference to the Muslim belief about the crucifixion comes from Sophronius, the Patriarch of Jerusalem. Writing around 636/637 CE, he criticised the Saracens for many reasons, asking, "Why is the cross mocked?"<sup>7</sup> Probably the earliest unambiguous account is found in the short pseudonymous text *The Apocalypse of Shenute*, which may be dated to 690 CE. This document refers to the "children of Ishmael" as "those who deny my sufferings, which I accepted upon the cross."<sup>8</sup>

A much more detailed early Christian account of the Muslim belief about the crucifixion comes from the monk John of Damascus, around a century after Muḥammad's time. Having accused the Prophet of authoring the Qur'an by plagiarising the Old and New Testaments with help from an unnamed Arian monk, he goes on to say the following:

And he says that the Jews wanted to crucify Him in violation of the Law, and that they seized His shadow and crucified this. But the Christ Himself was not crucified, he says, nor did He die, for God out of His love for Him took Him to Himself into heaven.<sup>9</sup>

Significantly, John of Damascus' statement mirrors the double denial in 4:157, that is, of the killing and the crucifixion of Jesus. He is also aware of the Qur'anic confirmation that God raised Jesus to Himself, which is mentioned in the verse that immediately follows 4:157, "Rather, Allah raised him to Himself. Allah is invincible, wise", as well as in Āl 'Imrān 3:55.

Christian writings from the eighth century, such as *The History of the Patriarchs of Alexandria* and *On the Triune Nature of God*, confirm that Muslims denied Jesus' crucifixion.<sup>10</sup> The same position is found in the exchanges of the Catholicos of the (Nestorian) Church of the East, Timothy the Great, with the Abbasid caliph al-Mahdī, a century and a half after the death of the Prophet. Significantly, when the latter cited 4:157 as proof that Jesus escaped the crucifixion, Timothy did not respond by denying this meaning of the verse. Instead, he cited another verse

19:33, in which Jesus mentions that he will die, and 3:55, which mentions God's *tawaffī* and raising of Jesus. Al-Mahdī retorted by explaining that Jesus was not dead yet but that he would die in the future, and the debate continued.<sup>11</sup>

Acceptance that the Qur'an denies the crucifixion is also found in the writings of other ninth-century writers, such as the Melkite bishop Theodore Abū Qurra, Syrian Orthodox (Jacobite) Ḥabīb Abū Rā'īta al-Takrītī, and Nestorian 'Ammār al-Baṣrī.<sup>12</sup> Even though early Christian-Muslim polemics showed at times reconciliation of viewpoints, this never extended to the crucifixion, in the same way it could never include the trinity.<sup>13</sup> Simply put, like early Muslim sources, early Christian writings do not provide any evidence that the first generation(s) of Muslims ever understood 4:157 as anything other than denying that Jesus was crucified.

In accepting the natural and spontaneous interpretation of the Qur'anic statement as a denial of the crucifixion of Jesus, non-Muslim scholars have seen the Qur'an's assertion as nothing more than a historical fallacy. Conversely, Muslim scholars have maintained that it corrects a popular, yet false claim.

## Breaking with the Consensus in Ismā'īlī Sources

Notwithstanding the consensus of Islamic sources, there are a handful of relatively early Ismā'īlī scholars who treated the crucifixion of Jesus as a historical fact.

The earliest of these scholars is Abū Ḥātim al-Rāzī (d. 322/933). He wrote a polemical book, *A'lām al-Nubuwwa*, in which he refuted various atheistic claims by the famous philosopher and physician Abū Bakr Ibn Zakariyyā al-Rāzī whom he met and debated many times. In one chapter, Abū Ḥātim responded to the claim of Abū Bakr, whom he referred to as "the atheist," that the prophets of various faiths contradicted each other, which undermined the veracity of religion in general. One example used by Abū Bakr was that "Muḥammad claimed that Jesus was not killed whereas both Jews and Christians reject that and claim that he was killed and crucified."<sup>14</sup>

Abū Ḥātim responded by saying that some scholars claimed that verse 4:157 does not deny that Jesus was crucified but rather means that the Jews did not truly kill him. God raised Jesus to Himself where he is alive, just like the martyrs who are killed in the cause of Allah whom the Qur'an also describes as "alive" (al-Baqara 2:154; Āl 'Imrān 3:169). Abū Ḥātim then went on to liken this interpretation to the Gospels' story that "Jesus died in the body but is still alive in the spirit." He also quoted verses 3:55 and 5:117, which use the root *w-f-y* to describe what happened to Jesus, for further support.<sup>15</sup>

Beyond citing those four verses, Abū Ḥātim did not engage with the Qur'anic text to show how it might accommodate the crucifixion of Jesus. The scholars that he claimed adopted this view are left unnamed, so it is not possible to identify them. Abū Ḥātim's focus was simply on refuting Abū Bakr's criticism.

Significantly, in a separate, exegetical work, *al-Iṣlāḥ*, Abū Ḥātim agreed with the majority interpretation that the Qur'an denies the crucifixion of Jesus. Furthermore, he adopted the claim common among Muslim exegetes that the person who led the Jews to Jesus was made to look like Jesus, misleading the Jews into killing him, thinking that they killed Jesus.<sup>16</sup>

Abū Ya'qūb al-Sijistānī (d. 331/942) authored a book in which he detailed his disagreement with *al-Iṣlāḥ* by his contemporary, Abū Ḥātim al-Rāzī. However, in his book *al-Yanābī'*, al-Sijistānī seems to accept that Jesus was crucified. In this work on his esoteric philosophy, al-Sijistānī interprets the crucifixion and the cross according to his Ismā'īlī understanding of the roles of the Imams and the Qā'im/Mahdī. For instance, he notes that the declaration of faith in Islam, *lā ilāha illā Allah*, consists of an affirmation and a negation and that the cross consists of one wood log that stands on another. Al-Sijistānī also emphasizes that it is significant that the declaration of faith consists of four words and that the cross has four endings. Al-Sijistānī does not quote the Qur'an or any other Islamic tradition in support of his views on the crucifixion.<sup>17</sup>

Half a century after Abū Ḥātim and Sijistānī, Ja'far Ibn Mansūr al-Yaman (380/990) reiterated the view that Jesus was crucified in a biographical work of prophets. This account of Jesus' life is broadly based on the Gospels

but many of its details conflict with them. It is not clear whether these details are derived from other Christian traditions. The author links the story to the Ismā'īlī concept of Qā'im. Again, this work does not make any effort to show how the Qur'an may confirm the crucifixion of Jesus.<sup>18</sup>

The historicity of the crucifixion of Jesus was also confirmed by the Brethren of Purity (Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'). This group, which appeared in the fourth century AH (tenth century CE), considered all religions authentic and combined Greek philosophy with Islamic thought and is believed to have had close links to Ismā'īlism. One of their fifty-two epistles discusses Jesus and illustrates their view that it was his human body that was crucified, while his soul survived the crucifixion.<sup>19</sup> Like the Ismā'īlī works reviewed here, the writings of the Brethren of Purity are not interpretations of the Qur'an, contrary to what some have claimed.<sup>20</sup> Their account of Jesus' crucifixion and other events of his life makes no reference to any Islamic tradition, Qur'anic or otherwise.

## The Crucifixion in Modern Muslim Scholarship

The overwhelming majority of Muslim scholars down the centuries have continued to believe that the Qur'an unequivocally denies that Jesus was crucified. However, two relatively new, relevant trends that have developed deserve to be mentioned here.

First, some scholars have begun to argue that Jesus was indeed put on the cross, but he survived the ordeal and went on to die a natural death later. It looks like this was first proposed in the second half of the nineteenth century by the Indian reformer Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan. Ahmad Khan wrote:

Crucifixion itself does not cause the death of a man, because only the palms of his hands, or the palms of his hands and feet are pierced. The real cause of death is that when someone is hanged on the cross for four or five days, he dies because of the pains of the pierced hands and feet, combined with the endured hunger, thirst and exertion... When we bring the whole event into historical connection, it is clear that Christ did not die on

the cross, but something happened there which caused people to believe that he died... After three or four hours Christ was taken down from the cross, and it is certain that at that moment he was still alive. Then the disciples concealed him in a very secret place, out of fear of the enmity of the Jews... and they spread the rumour that Christ ascended to heaven.<sup>21</sup>

Ahmad Khan adopted a strict rationalistic approach to reading scriptures. For instance, he also interpreted the virginal conception and Jesus' miracles as natural events that did not involve any supernatural elements. He was also influenced by Western scholarship, which is where the non-fatal crucifixion theory first appeared.

The earliest form of the non-fatal crucifixion theory was proposed by the German theologians Karl Friedrich Bahrdt, late in the eighteenth century, and Heinrich Paulus, early in the nineteenth century. Advocates of the theory of non-fatal crucifixion often cite a report by Josephus about someone who survived a crucifixion.<sup>22</sup> Versions of this theory include the suggestions that Jesus fell into a deep swoon on the cross, pretended to have died, or put himself in a state of self-hypnosis. It is claimed that he was treated in the tomb, or that he managed to gather whatever energy he had left after his ordeal to escape the tomb. Surviving the crucifixion is then used to explain the emptiness of Jesus' tomb and his appearances to his disciples. These theories have been roundly rejected on medical grounds and due to their failure to explain post-crucifixion events. While surviving a crucifixion is not impossible, it is highly unlikely.<sup>23</sup>

One person that seemed to have been influenced by Ahmad Khan was his contemporary Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, the founder of the Ahmadiyya movement. The latter first held the standard Muslim belief regarding the crucifixion, but he changed his view in 1891 claiming that God informed him that Jesus had died.<sup>24</sup> Ahmad maintained that Jesus was put into a swoon that was mistaken for death. A terrible earthquake happened that made the Jews fearful about their homes and families, so they rushed to take Jesus down from the cross, thinking that he had died when he had not. Jesus later went on to live in India.<sup>25</sup> He is said to have later died a natural death and his tomb is in Kashmir.

The second trend that contradicts the majority Muslim belief regarding what happened to Jesus was begun by the twentieth-century Egyptian reformer Muḥammad ‘Abduh. ‘Abduh claimed that Jesus died a natural death and denied that he will return.<sup>26</sup> This view was adopted by prominent Arab scholars who were influenced by ‘Abduh, some of whom were his students. These include Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍa, who compiled ‘Abduh’s views, Muṣṭafā al-Marāghī,<sup>27</sup> Maḥmūd Shaltūt,<sup>28</sup> Muḥammad Ibn ‘Āshūr,<sup>29</sup> Muḥammad Abū Zahra, and Muḥammad al-Ghazālī.<sup>30</sup> This view is based on reading the Qur’anic *wafāt* of Jesus as being a *wafāt* of death, not of sleep. Yet, significantly, this view still argued that Jesus was not crucified.<sup>31</sup>

While there is a growing minority of Muslim scholars that accepts that Jesus was crucified, the overwhelming majority continue to argue that he avoided the crucifixion.

## The Qur’an’s Account in Western Scholarship

In recent years, there has been a growing tendency among a minority of scholars to go against the centuries-long consensus to argue that the historicity of the crucifixion of Jesus is not rejected in the Qur’an. These scholars suggest that the majority consensus is based on a misunderstanding of the Qur’an, which Muslims have failed to correct for fourteen centuries.<sup>32</sup> One work that appears to have been particularly influential in promoting this view, including in general public polemics, is Todd Lawson’s *The Crucifixion and the Qur’an*, which is based on a two-part paper by the same author published three decades earlier, itself derived from his 1980 MA thesis. He seeks support for his argument by noting that not all early Muslim scholars understood 4:157 as denying the crucifixion.<sup>33</sup> The interpretation of the overwhelming majority of scholars, Lawson argues, is a product of tafsīr, rather than the unambiguous text.

Lawson draws on Ismā‘īlī writings to support his argument. Yet, as already explained, in addition to being relatively late and few, these sources do not engage with the Qur’anic text in any significant way. This point is often overlooked by scholars who highlight Ismā‘īlī texts to downplay the significance of the Muslim scholarly consensus on this issue. For instance, when citing Abū Ḥātim’s earlier work to confirm

his acceptance that Jesus was crucified, these scholars do not seem to be aware of his more significant, exegetical book that denies the crucifixion outright,<sup>34</sup> or they simply explain it away.<sup>35</sup> While exaggerating the significance of Ismā'īlī writings on the crucifixion of Jesus, Lawson also acknowledges that those authors used the crucifixion for doctrinal purposes, namely for “propagating their own typologically iterative view of salvation and eschatology.”<sup>36</sup>

The primary modern alternative to the ubiquitous interpretation of 4:157 is that it denies the ability of man, represented by the Jews, to defeat the will of God, represented by his agent Jesus, even though the latter is said to have been killed. Jesus was crucified, it is argued, so the verse only denies that it was *the Jews* who killed him, as it was *God* who took his soul.<sup>37</sup> Another version of this view is that the verse confirms that it is God who gives life and death, so had He not permitted the killing of Jesus, it would not have happened.<sup>38</sup>

While this alternative interpretation has been promoted by mainly Christian theologians, it has also been advocated by a few historians and Muslim scholars. Two different objectives could be seen as giving impetus to this new interpretation of 4:157, at times explicitly and at others more subtly. The first objective is the seeking of a rapprochement between Islam and Christianity. Mainly Christian theologians, although some Muslims as well, have argued that the denial of the crucifixion of Jesus by Muslims, because of their understanding of 4:157, is a major obstacle to a closer and more amicable relationship between the two faiths. As one Christian theologian articulated this view:

Q 4:157-58 has become an important exegetical site for repairing the broken relationship between Christianity and Islam. Typically, authors with this goal have hoped to shift attention away from the Qur'an's supposed denial of the crucifixion in Q 4:157 and instead attempt to find common ground in its affirmation in Q 4:158 that God raised Jesus to Godself. Christian scholars, hoping to present the Qur'an in a more positive light to Christian readers, have labored to prove that these verses need not be interpreted as a denial of the crucifixion.<sup>39</sup>

This alternative interpretation suggests that verses 4:157-158 affirm “the death and resurrection of Christ.”<sup>40</sup> More broadly, it confirms “the story of Jesus’ resurrection and ascension as told in the New Testament.”<sup>41</sup>

Ironically, if this theological approach were effective in achieving Islam-Christianity rapprochement, then it could only do the opposite to the relationship between Christianity and Judaism. Paul (1 Cor 1:23) stated that the concept of a *crucified Christ* was a “stumbling block to Jews.”<sup>42</sup> But, while Paul’s statement may have certainly been true in the past, theological considerations arguably have much less impact than worldly matters on the state of the relationship between the three great Abrahamic faiths in today’s world. I agree with one assessment that “the attempt of some Christian apologists to circumvent the Qur’anic denial of the crucifixion is disingenuous in the extreme.”<sup>43</sup>

The second objective, which is that of some Islamic apologetics, is to protect the Qur’an against the accusation that it contains incorrect historical information. The late Mahmoud Ayoub, who is often cited as proof of a growing trend among Muslim scholars to not read the Qur’an as denying the crucifixion, has argued that the ubiquitous Muslim interpretation of the Qur’an would not “answer convincingly the charge of history.”<sup>44</sup> Ayoub goes beyond asserting that the Qur’an does not contain a denial of Jesus’ crucifixion to make the sweeping and unsupported statement that the Qur’anic account of Jesus, in general, is theological, rather than historical (*italics are mine*):

Why then, it must be asked, does the Qur’an deny the crucifixion of Christ in the face of apparently overwhelming evidence? *Muslim commentators have not been able convincingly to disprove the crucifixion.* Rather, they have compounded the problem by adding the conclusion of their substitutionist theories. The problem has been, we believe, one of understanding. Commentators have generally taken the verse to be a historical statement. This statement, like *all the other statements concerning Jesus in the Qur’an, belongs not to history but to theology in the broadest sense.*<sup>45</sup>

If the crucifixion of Jesus is accepted as historical, then the view that the Qur'an denies it would mean that it makes a historically false claim. It cannot, therefore, be the Word of God, the Omniscient. The suggestion that the Qur'an can be read as confirming, or at least not denying, the historicity of Jesus' death on the cross would then help in protecting its credibility and status as divine revelation.

Ayoub claims that the Gospel narratives of the crucifixion are historical while the Qur'an's account of Jesus is not historical but theological. One pointer to the arbitrariness of this apportioning of history and theology is that the crucifixion is the cornerstone of the theology of the New Testament but it would have no theological significance whatsoever in the Qur'an. Furthermore, Judaism never knew of a suffering Messiah, so it is not a historical concept either.<sup>46</sup>

Away from the two main goals of seeking Islam-Christianity rapprochement and protecting the credibility of the Qur'an, some historians have found rejecting that the Qur'an denies the crucifixion useful in supporting their reconstruction of history. One scholar, for example, has placed 4:157-158 in a historical setting whereby the Qur'anic text is said to be rejecting the Sasanian accusation of the Jews that they killed Jesus because it was demoralising to the Christians who worshipped Jesus. Denying that they killed Jesus, it is also argued, was necessary for the Prophet to have any chance of creating the ecumenical union of monotheists that he sought.<sup>47</sup>

In some way, those who challenge the consensual meaning of 4:157 try to address a question that is ignored by those who see a historical mistake in the Qur'an. Presuming that Muḥammad is the author of the Qur'an, there is no convincing explanation for his rejection of the crucifixion of Jesus. He had nothing to gain from denying it and much to lose. The human nature of Jesus is repeatedly stressed in the Qur'an and his divinity is rejected in unambiguous terms. The doctrine of atonement also would not have been admissible even if the crucifixion were not denied in the Qur'an because it is incompatible with its theology. There was absolutely nothing that Muḥammad could have gained by going against the dominant consensus of both Jews and Christians that Jesus died on the cross. This observation equally applies to the suggestion that 4:157 is ambiguous, as this ambiguity would have harmed the Prophet's

mission. Furthermore, any ambiguity about this particular issue could not have been left without explanatory comments from the Prophet, not least in his debates with Jews and Christians. It looks like he had no say on the Qur'an's verdict that Jesus was not crucified, which then goes against the starting assumption of his authorship of the Qur'an.

Reading a denial of the crucifixion of Jesus from the Qur'an also poses a challenge to the popular view that the text was much influenced by the Jews and Christians of Arabia and their sources. This is what we will address next.

## The Qur'an and the Talmud

Western scholars have long believed that the Prophet Muḥammad had knowledge of Jewish scriptures, including the Talmud,<sup>48</sup> and that "very much of the Qur'an is directly derived from Jewish books, not so much from the Old Testament Scriptures as from the Talmud and other post-Biblical writings."<sup>49</sup> This conclusion is based on similarities between some Qur'anic passages and Talmudic texts.<sup>50</sup>

Significantly, even works that claim that the Talmud was a major source for the Qur'an have had to accept that the Qur'an's unique statement on the crucifixion cannot be linked to the Talmud.<sup>51</sup> Yet an attempt has recently been made by Ian Mevorach to claim that it is a direct response to the Babylonian Talmud,<sup>52</sup> which has been firmly endorsed<sup>53</sup> or considered possible.<sup>54</sup> The ultimate goal of this approach is to show that 4:157 is a counterargument to the *Jewish claim of responsibility* in that tradition, not to the *Christian tradition* that Jesus was crucified, even when not linked directly to the Talmud.<sup>55</sup> This is the Bavli passage in question:

*On the eve of the Passover Yeshu was hanged. For forty days before the execution took place, a herald went forth and cried, "He is going forth to be stoned because he has practised sorcery and enticed Israel to apostasy. Any one who can say anything in his favour, let him come forward and plead on his behalf". But since nothing was brought forward in his favour he was hanged on the eve of the Passover! (b. Sanhedrin 43a).<sup>56</sup>*

Mevorach argues that “the sequence of events in Jesus’ execution in the Talmud, first stoning and then hanging, can be read as corresponding to the Qur’an’s double-denial that the Jews ‘did not kill him, nor did they crucify him’”.<sup>57</sup>

One objection to linking 4:157 to the Talmudic passage is that the verse does not refer to stoning even though this term appears in several other verses (Hūd 11:91; al-Kahf 18:20; Maryam 19:46; Yāsīn 36:18; al-Dukhān 44:20). Even more telling, there is no mention in the Qur’an of any of the other details in the Bavli passage, including its second part, which claims that “Yeshu had five disciples, Matthai, Nakai, Nezer, Buni and Todah,” before proceeding to justify why each had to be executed. It is unconvincing in the extreme to claim that the four-word pronouncement in 4:157 is a response to a substantive Talmudic narrative, which is made up of nearly 370 words according to one English translation, only because the latter states that *a Yeshu was hanged*.

This claim is one result of the excessive focus on tracing Qur’anic texts to Jewish and Christian sources. The weakness of the attempt to link 4:157 to the Talmud becomes even clearer when we consider other passages from that book that are said to talk about Jesus and his mother, accusing Mary of adultery and making Jesus an illegitimate son. These claims seem to be intended to refute the Christian story of the virginal conception.<sup>58</sup> This accusation is also relevant to discuss here because one verse leading to 4:157 that we will discuss later deals with regard to this particular Jewish accusation of Mary.

Writing around the end of the second century, the Christian author Tertullian mentioned this Jewish accusation in his depiction of a hypothetical future scene in which he mocks the damned Jews after Jesus’ return:

“This is he,” I shall say, “*the son of the carpenter or the harlot,*” the Sabbath-breaker, the Samaritan, who had a devil. This is he whom you bought from Judas; this is he, who was struck with reed and fist, defiled with spittle, given gall and vinegar to drink. This is he whom the disciples secretly stole away, that it might be said he had risen—unless it was the gardener who

removed him, lest his lettuces should be trampled by the throng of visitors!”<sup>59</sup>

The Talmudic passages in question, as is the case with other defamatory references to Jesus, use coded names for him, presumably to avoid Christian persecution. The two main coded references to Jesus are “Ben Pandira/Pantera” (son of Pandira/Pantera) and “Ben Stada” (son of Stada), who is said to have been born out of an adulterous relationship. The following passage continues a discussion of making alterations to the skin as a way of invoking magical power:

It was taught. R. Eliezer said to the Sages: But did not Ben Stada bring forth witchcraft from Egypt by means of scratches [in the form of charms] upon his flesh? He was a fool, answered they, and proof cannot be adduced from fools. [Was he then the son of Stada: surely he was the son of Pandira? – Said R. Hisda: The husband was Stada, the paramour was Pandira. But the husband was Pappos b. Judah?—His mother was Stada. But his mother was Miriam the hairdresser?—It is as we say in Pumbeditha: This one has been unfaithful to (lit., ‘turned away from’—*satath da*) her husband]. (b. Shabbat 104b)

The passage shows rabbis agreeing that Ben Stada and Ben Pandira were one and the same, although there is disagreement on whether Stada was the name of his father or his mother.<sup>60</sup>

One particularly interesting passage in the Talmud, which was censored from other manuscripts from the era of Christendom, suggests that Yeshu, Ben Stada, and Ben Pandira are the same person. Repeating almost word for word a part of b. Shabbat 104b and borrowing from b. Sanhedrin 43a the reference to the hanging on the eve of the Passover, this passage identifies Ben Stada as the victim:

And this they did to Ben Stada in Lydda, and they hung him on the eve of Passover. Ben Stada was Ben Padira. R. Hisda said: “The husband was Stada, the paramour Pandira. But was not the

husband Pappos b. Judah? – His mother’s name was Stada. But his mother was Miriam, a dresser of woman’s hair? As they say in Pumbaditha, this woman has turned away from her husband, (i.e. committed adultery)”. (b. Sanhedrin 67a)

The Talmud has other passages that confirm the stoning of Ben Stada for deceiving people.<sup>61</sup>

Some scholars have accepted that Ben Pandira and Ben Stada are both pseudonyms for Jesus,<sup>62</sup> but others dismiss most claimed coded names, including Ben Stada, and accept only Ben Pandira.<sup>63</sup> The latter was a very common Roman name and was widely used in the Roman armies, with various epitaphs of Roman soldiers carrying it.<sup>64</sup> This name in the Talmud is said to be reasonably identifiable with Jesus because of external evidence.<sup>65</sup> The third-century Christian theologian Origen quotes Celsus, the Greek critic of Christianity, writing around 180 CE, who cited Jewish stories accusing Jesus’ mother of having an adulterous relationship with a Roman soldier:

When she was pregnant she was turned out of doors by the carpenter to whom she had been betrothed, as having been guilty of adultery, and that she bore a child to a certain soldier named Panthera.<sup>66</sup>

This early use of Ben Pandira has made some consider it the oldest reference to Jesus in Talmudic literature.<sup>67</sup>

Now, linking the simple and clear statement in the Qur’an that rejects the Jewish accusation of Mary to any of these confused passages, not to mention the uncertainty about their intended characters, is highly speculative and lacks any evidence. This same observation has to be made of the claim linking 4:157 to its alleged Talmudic target.

Also, if 4:157 is to be linked to the known claim that the Jews killed Jesus, then the logical source of choice should be the Gospel narratives, not a passing and vague reference in the Talmud. This is certainly even more so the case considering that the latter contradicts the main, much more detailed, and far more known accounts of the crucifixion of Jesus, of the Gospels.

To state the obvious, the Qur'an did engage with the beliefs of the Jews and Christians, as it did with those of the Quraysh and the Arabs of the Peninsula in general and even ancient peoples. In the Qur'an, though, there is little interest in how and when *false* beliefs appeared, what their historical development was, or whether they were traceable to oral or written tradition. When certain beliefs are rejected in the Qur'an, this comes in the form of asserting that these were not communicated by God through prophets but distortions of the revelations and/or total fabrications by people. This is the most fundamental distinction in the Qur'an between truth and falsehood when it comes to beliefs. Claiming that the Qur'an responded to the Talmud specifically is unjustified without producing evidence.

Furthermore, whatever the Jews believed about Jesus and his mother goes back to his time, when most of his Jewish audience rejected his mission. This rejection and its natural development into various accusations against him and his mother predate the Talmud. The latter only codified such beliefs; it is not their origin. To be sure, even scholars who are particularly generous in accepting which passages refer to Jesus and Mary accept that they "appear only in the Babylonian Talmud and can be dated, at the earliest, to the late third-early fourth century CE."<sup>68</sup> It is very hard to justify the view that the Qur'an's rejection of centuries-long common Jewish beliefs about Jesus targeted tiny, hard-to-find passages buried in the huge Talmudic tradition that Muḥammad was supposedly well familiar with! Indeed, even those who argue for a significant Talmudic influence on the Qur'an have to concede that there is no evidence that Muḥammad had seen a Talmud or ever heard its name.<sup>69</sup>

We can be certain that the average Jew in Arabia at the time of Muḥammad would not have been familiar with such minor, not to say ambiguous and confusing, stories in the Talmud. It sounds unrealistic and farfetched to think that if an average Jew at the time was asked why they thought that the Christian Messiah was false, they would have pointed to one of those few passages in a polemical book that they probably had never read any part of! That is effectively the implication of suggesting that the Qur'an's discourse is targeted at the Talmud. The Jews believed, for example, that the Messiah would come as a victorious

leader, not as a lowkey teacher whose humiliation would be completed by his crucifixion. It is also worth noting that those passages do not belong to the Mishnah, i.e. the oral law, in the Talmud, but they are part of its detailed commentary.

But such specific linking of a Qur'anic statement to the Talmud has an even more fundamental problem. It is based, as one scholar has pointed out, on multilayered assumptions, none of which have been proven:

- (1) That we know who these Arabian Jews actually were and just what type of Judaism they practiced;
- (2) that we comprehend the nature of the contact between these Jews and the earliest Muslims;
- and (3) that we can somehow show the interconnection between the Qur'an and the religious ideas that circulated among these Arabian Jews and others.

The reality, however, is that very little is known about any of this because of “the paucity of sources, the overlooking of other sources, and the excesses of Orientalism.”<sup>70</sup> We do not have any evidence that the Jews of Arabia possessed the emerging normative rabbinic writings. In fact, for some unclear reasons, the Jews of Arabia are not even mentioned in the Mishnah and Talmuds!

It should also be noted that both the Torah and the Injil are mentioned in the Qur'an, at times with a challenge to the Jews and the Christians to consult them. Yet there is no mention whatsoever of the Talmud. Had the Qur'an engaged with the Talmud, it would have probably attacked it and accused the Jews of creating a book that was not revealed by God.<sup>71</sup>

## The Crucifixion and Other Verses

Scholars who deny the Qur'an's denial of the historicity of the crucifixion of Jesus have also called on verses other than 4:157 for support. This is one such verse,<sup>72</sup> which is traditionally believed to refer to a specific incident in the battle of Badr:

You [O you who have believed] did not kill them, but it was Allah who killed them. You [O Muḥammad] did not throw when you threw, but it was Allah who threw that He might test the believers with a good test. Indeed, Allah is hearing and knowing. (Al-Anfāl 8:17)

There are serious flaws with this specific attempt. First, 8:17 makes its point by allegorically replacing the believers with God as the true actor. Likening 4:157 to 8:17 wrongly *implies* that the former has a similar metaphor. Second, 8:17 reports those human actions as essentially good because they are taken by believers to defend themselves against aggressive unbelievers. But the attempt to crucify Jesus is described as evil, so attributing it to God is theologically untenable. Third, the denial of the crucifixion in 4:157 is followed in 4:158 by a second action that is *explicitly attributed to God*, which is raising Jesus. There is no such attribution when it comes to the crucifixion.

Another creative interpretation to get around the clear meaning of 4:157 that Jesus was not killed likens him to martyrs, who are described in the Qur'an as alive with God (also Āl 'Imrān 3:169):<sup>73</sup>

Do not say about those who are *killed* in the way of Allah, "They are dead". Rather, they are alive, but you do not perceive it. (Al-Baqara 2:154)

This attempt ignores the fundamental fact that 2:154 and 3:169 explicitly talk about believers who were "killed," whereas Jesus is described as having been saved.<sup>74</sup> That martyrs are alive with God is unambiguously confirmed in both verses, but so is the fact that they have been killed. Like 2:154 and 3:169, 4:157 and many other verses are meant to be statements of facts. Such verses should not be confused with rhetoric, allegories, euphemisms, and other such linguistic devices. This confusion would seriously undermine the intelligibility of the Qur'an.

The Qur'an's confirmation of Jesus' mortality has also been called upon as evidence that he was crucified.<sup>75</sup> This assertion occurs in these words that are attributed to Jesus:

Peace is on me the day I was born, the day I will die (*amūtu*), and the day I am brought back alive. (Maryam 19:33)

Significantly, this verse refers to *death* not *killing*, so it could not refer to the crucifixion or any other form of murder. The Qur'anic text contains a clear distinction between the two ways of losing one's life, as in this verse:

Muḥammad is not but a messenger before whom the messengers have passed on. So if he dies (*māta*) or be killed (*qutila*), would you turn back on your heels [to unbelief]? (Āl 'Imrān 3:144)

It is also worth noting that in 19:33 Jesus speaks about experiencing one death and one resurrection, so the Gospels' assertion that he was raised from the dead after the crucifixion is implicitly denied.

On the other hand, other verses indirectly indicate that Jesus was not crucified. The following verse confirms that God foiled the Jews' attempt to harm Jesus:

They (the Children of Israel) planned, and *Allah planned; Allah is the best of planners*. (Āl 'Imrān 3:54)

That God rescued Jesus is made even clearer in the following verse in which God first reminds Jesus of the miracles he granted him, before making this statement:

And [remember] *when I restrained the Children of Israel from you* when you came to them with clear proofs. (Al-Mā'ida 5:110)

As it is preceded by a verse about the Day of Judgement, most exegetes think that this verse describes a dialogue that will happen on the Day of Judgement, with only a small minority arguing that it happened at some point after the attempt to crucify Jesus.<sup>76</sup> Either way, God's reminder to Jesus would make no sense if he later abandoned him or was going to abandon him to the fatal ordeal of the crucifixion. Similarly, for an audience six centuries after Jesus' time, the reminder of 5:110 that God rescued Jesus and the

confirmation of 3:54 that God's plan foiled the Jewish attempt would have made sense only if they were informing the audience or confirming to them that Jesus was not crucified. In other words, 3:45 and 5:110 would make sense only if 4:157 was understood to mean that Jesus escaped the crucifixion.

## The Non-Crucifixion Verse in Focus

In this section, I aim to show that both the language and context of 4:157 repeatedly and unambiguously indicate that this verse can only be a denial of both the killing and the crucifixion of Jesus. This is what underpins the consensus of Muslim exegetes in their understanding of this verse. Conversely, rejecting this ubiquitous interpretation is driven by a priori views and convictions, which I have already quickly reviewed, that are extraneous to the Qur'anic text.

To fully appreciate the clarity of the meaning of 4:157, we need to also study related verses. More specifically, we will focus on the four verses leading to 4:157 and the verse that follows it, as they provide immediate contextual information that is useful for avoiding any misunderstanding of 4:157. We will start with verse 4:153 as it commences a new context in which the Jews, and later Jesus, are the main subject:

The People of the Book ask you [O Muḥammad!] to bring down to them a book from heaven. They had asked of Moses greater than that and said, "Show us Allah plainly." So, the thunderbolt struck them for their wrongdoing. Then they took the calf [for worship] after clear proofs had come to them. We pardoned that. We gave Moses a clear authority. (Al-Nisā' 4:153)

We raised over them the mount for their covenant and We said to them, "Enter the gate while prostrate." We said to them, "Do not transgress on the Sabbath," and We took from them a solemn covenant. (Al-Nisā' 4:154)

[We cursed them] for breaking their covenant, rejecting the signs of Allah, killing prophets unjustly, and saying, "Our hearts are

covered.” Rather, Allah has sealed them because of their disbelief, so they do not believe except for few. (Al-Nisā’ 4:155)

And for their disbelief and their saying against Mary a grave slander (Al-Nisā’ 4:156)

And their saying, “We have killed the Messiah, Jesus, the son of Mary, the messenger of Allah.” They did not kill him, nor did they crucify him, but it was made to appear so to them. Those who differ over it are in doubt about it. They have no knowledge of it except the following of conjecture. They did not kill him with certainty. (Al-Nisā’ 4:157)

Rather, Allah raised him to Himself. Allah is invincible, wise. (Al-Nisā’ 4:158)

Verse 4:153 first criticises the Jews at the time of Muḥammad for demanding that he show them a book descended from heaven, which they asked for as proof of his claim that the Qur’an was revealed to him by God. It points out that their fellow Jews at the time of Moses made an even greater demand of their prophet to make it possible for them to see God so that they could believe him. This transgression is referenced in another verse in the Qur’an that addresses the Jews directly:

[Recall] when you said, “O Moses, we will never believe you until we see Allah plainly”. So the thunderbolt overtook you as you looked on. (Al-Baqara 2:55)

The closest reference to this event in the Old Testament seems to be the following:

Then the Lord said to Moses, “Go down and warn the people not to break through to the Lord to look; otherwise many of them will perish”. (Exod. 19:21)

Having gone up to Mount Sinai as instructed by God, Moses was ordered to go down to warn his followers against bypassing some physical boundaries to see God. The Qur'anic text, on the other hand, talks about a demand that Moses' followers made of him. The ending of 2.55 suggests that they carried out whatever they meant to do in anticipation of seeing God, but they were instead struck by a thunderbolt.

Verse 4:153 goes on to make another criticism of Moses' followers, which is taking a calf for a god. This grave sin is mentioned several times in the Qur'an (al-Baqara 2:51-54, 92-93; al-Nisā' 4:153; al-A'rāf 7:148-150). The episode of the golden calf is also found in the Old Testament (Exod. 32:1-33).

Verse 4:154 references other events that reflect the failure of Moses' followers to honour their covenant with God, including keeping the Sabbath (also al-Baqara 2:65; al-Nisā' 4:47). The sanctity of the Sabbath and the command to cease work on it is mentioned in many places in the Old Testament, the first of which is in Exodus (16:23). It also reports several violations by the whole community and by individuals (e.g. Exod. 16:27; Num. 15:32-36).

Verse 4:155 confirms God's condemnation of the Jews for breaking their solemn covenant, rejecting His signs, killing prophets without justification, and claiming that their hearts are "covered." The seriousness of the killing of prophets, who are not named, is underlined by its mention in several verses (al-Baqara 2:61, 87, 91; Āl 'Imrān 3: 21, 112, 181, 183; al-Mā'ida 5:70). This charge needs to be discussed in detail because of its particular relevance to the account of the crucifixion in the Qur'an.

The Old Testament describes the killing of the priest Zechariah, son of Jehoiada (2 Chron. 24:17-22), who is called a "prophet" in rabbinic writings (b. Gittin 57b), and the prophet Uriah, son of Shemaiah (Jer. 26:20-24). They are thought to have lived in the ninth century and the end of the seventh century BCE, respectively. The prophet Jeremiah, who was contemporary to Uriah, also came close to facing death (Jer. 26:11). We also find passing references to the killing of *multiple prophets* in the ninth century BCE. Jezebel, the wife of Ahab, King of Israel, is said to have been involved in "killing the Lord's prophets" (1 Kings 18:4). These

multiple murders are also mentioned by the prophet Elijah who, after running for his life, complained to God:

The Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and *killed your prophets* with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away. (1 Kings 19:10)

There is also a fifth-century BCE mention of the mass murder of prophets, which may be referring to the same killings mentioned by Elijah. Several inhabitants of Judah are reported to have complained to God about their Israelite ancestors:

They were disobedient and rebelled against you and cast your law behind their backs and *killed your prophets*, who had warned them in order to turn them back to you, and they committed great blasphemies. (Neh. 9:26)

The Jews' killing of many prophets is also reported in the New Testament. Paul (1 Thess. 2:15) accuses the Jews of killing "both the Lord Jesus and the prophets." Significantly, this accusation is repeatedly mentioned in a scathing attack by Jesus in a speech to the public (also Luke 11:49, 13:34; Acts 7:52):

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you build the tombs of the prophets and decorate the graves of the righteous, and you say, "If we had lived in the days of our ancestors, we would not have taken part with them in *shedding the blood of the prophets*." Thus you testify against yourselves that you are descendants of those who *murdered the prophets*. Fill up, then, the measure of your ancestors. You snakes, you brood of vipers! How can you escape being sentenced to hell? Therefore I send you prophets, sages, and scribes, *some of whom you will kill and crucify*, and some you will flog in your synagogues and pursue from town to town, so that upon you may come all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood

of Zechariah son of Barachiah, whom you murdered between the sanctuary and the altar. Truly I tell you, all this will come upon this generation. “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that *kills the prophets* and stones those who are sent to it!” (Matt. 23:29-37)

Zechariah son of Barachiah is not the Zechariah son of Jehoiada mentioned earlier. He is the prophet to whom the Old Testament’s Book of Zechariah is attributed. This seems to be a misidentification by Matthew, while Luke (11:51) does not name Zechariah’s father.<sup>77</sup> The charge against the Jews of killing many prophets is also found in Jewish and Christian writings.<sup>78</sup>

The other accusation against the Jews in verse 4:155 is that they claim that their hearts were “covered.” This has been interpreted in two different ways. First, the Jews claimed that their hearts were already full of knowledge, so they did not need the teaching of prophets. Second, they claimed that their hearts were closed to the prophets’ teaching. This interpretation seems to mirror a criticism of the Jews by the Christian Stephen of being “uncircumcised in heart” (Acts 7:51). The concept of the circumcision of the heart is also found in the Old Testament (Jer. 9:26) and Paul’s writings (Rom. 2:29). The first interpretation seems more plausible for two reasons. The Qur’an uses different terminology for the state of the heart described in the second interpretation, calling it “sealed” (*khatama*) (e.g. Q al-Baqara 2:7; al-Jāthiya 45:23). Also, it does not sound reasonable to say that the Jews confessed to an irrational rejection as their defence argument! Rather, claiming that their hearts do not need further knowledge sounds more like an argument that they would have used to reject the teaching of new prophets.

Verse 4:156 moves from the Jews’ transgression against unnamed prophets to their specific rejection of and hostility towards Jesus, including his mother. Given that they rejected his claim that he was sent by God, let alone that he was the awaited Messiah, it is no surprise that they did not believe in Mary’s virginal conception—a miracle that the Qur’an confirms in more than one place (Āl ‘Imrān 3:42-47; Maryam 19:16-22). The Jews accused Mary of becoming pregnant with Jesus illegitimately, as we discussed earlier.

We now come to the main verse of interest, 4:157. It starts by adding the Jews' boast that they killed Jesus to the sinful acts listed in the previous verses. The description "the messenger of Allah" has been attributed by some exegetes to God and by others to the Jews. In the former case, it would be a confirmation of Jesus' status by God. If, instead, it is a part of the Jews' claim, it is a sarcastic ridiculing of Jesus' claim to having been sent by God. I am inclined to this reading because it is aligned with the fact that the title "Messiah" is used by the Jews derisively in their claim. Their use of the title "Messiah" sarcastically contrasts their boast that they killed Jesus with their longstanding belief that the awaited Messiah was going to be an invincible and victorious military leader, thus deriding Jesus' claim to messiahship. Also, it seems a more natural reading of the text to consider the response to the Jewish claim to be starting with the refutative retort that "they did not kill him, nor did they crucify him."

Condemning the Jews for "saying" (*qawlihim*) that they killed Jesus is preceded by two other claims they made that are described using this very term. The first claim is that their hearts are covered and the second is of their slander against Mary, both of which are rejected by the Qur'an as being false. There is no justification, then, to suggest that the third condemned "saying," which is about killing Jesus, is presented as anything other than a false claim too.

Also, two verses earlier, in 4:155, the Jews are condemned for the *actual* "killing" of prophets, yet in the case of Jesus, the Jews are denounced for "saying" that they killed him. Had 4:157 meant that they truly killed him, this condemnation would also have been of the *killing*, not of *bragging about the killing*. From the Qur'anic perspective, killing Jesus would have been far graver than failing to accept that his death was ultimately God's prerogative, which is the alternative interpretation of 4:157.

Additionally, the Qur'an had just condemned the Jews for killing prophets, as it does in other verses, and no one would suggest those verses meant to imply that it was God who killed them. There is no justification for treating the supposed murder of Jesus differently.

It is difficult to see how 4:157 could have been clearer in rejecting that the Jews killed Jesus, in particular when it goes on to equally emphatically deny that they crucified him. By following its denial of the

killing with *specifically* rejecting that he was crucified, any claim that Jesus suffered a non-fatal crucifixion is also dismissed. The verse unambiguously states that Jesus was not killed or even non-fatally crucified.

When boasting that they killed Jesus, the Jews did not lie but *mistakenly thought* that they killed him. This is made clear when their claim is contrasted, using the word “but” (*lākin*), with the corrective statement “it was made to appear so to them.” This indicates that there was some ground for the Jews’ belief that they crucified Jesus. As already discussed, verses 3:54 and 5:110 indicate that they unsuccessfully tried to harm Jesus.

Another significant observation about the wording of 4:157 is its use of the construct “*mā* (did not) ... *lākin* (but) ...”. In all of the tens of verses in which this form appears (e.g. al-Baqara 2:102; Āl ‘Imrān 3:67, 79; al-Anfāl 8:17; al-Tawba 9:56), whatever follows “*mā*” is presented as false, because it is negated by “*mā*,” while whatever follows “*lākin*” is given as a true statement that is contrasted with the former. This is one example:

And they did not wrong Us, but they were wronging themselves.  
(Al-Baqara 2:57)

Again, there is nothing to justify reading this form in 4:157 in a different way. We must conclude that the verse denies the killing and crucifixion of Jesus while affirming that it *appeared* to the Jews so.

Most Muslim scholars have taken the *appearance* statement to mean that someone who looked like Jesus was crucified instead of him. Al-Ṭabarī has preserved several variations of the substitution theory, which he attributes to the Successors Wahb Ibn Munabbih, Qatāda Ibn Di‘āma (d. 117/735), and Ismā‘īl al-Suddī (d. 127/744).<sup>79</sup> Some of these narratives may be labelled *voluntary substitutionism*, as they involve one of Jesus’ disciples, who was made or offered to be made to look like him, volunteering to be crucified instead of his master. Al-Ṭabarī attributes to “some Christians” a version of *punishment substitutionism* whereby the person who betrayed Jesus is punished by involuntarily being made to look like him and being crucified in his stead. Some contemporary scholars have alternatively proposed that this was a case of misidentification, arguing that circumstances would have made it possible for the wrong

person to be arrested and executed.<sup>80</sup> Such differences within Muslim scholarship, it should be noted, are all within the consensus that Jesus escaped the crucifixion.

The Muslim exegetical of *substitutionism* has been confused with what may be termed *docetism substitutionism* by Western scholars who try to trace the Qur'an's denial of the crucifixion to this early Christian doctrine.<sup>81</sup> Docetism is the doctrine that Jesus only seemed to have a physical body, which effectively denies his human nature. His crucifixion and suffering, it follows, were only an illusion, as both are experiences that only a body can undergo. Reports of the existence of this belief among some Christians go back as early as around 110 CE when bishop Ignatius of Antioch, Syria, wrote a letter to the Christians of Smyrna (today's Izmir in Turkey) in which he complains that, "Some unbelievers say that his Passion was merely in semblance."<sup>82</sup> He criticises docetists who did not accept that Jesus suffered the crucifixion.<sup>83</sup> Docetism is also found in the teachings of the second-century Egyptian Christian gnostic Basilides,<sup>84</sup> as well as three of the Nag Hammadi books.<sup>85</sup> Yet this concept is not a concept that is recognised in any form in the Qur'an.<sup>86</sup>

Furthermore, using docetism to undermine the standard understanding of the earlier part of 4:157 is a case of reverse causation, whereby a cause and its result are mistaken for each other. The substitution theory was introduced to *explain* the clear statement of the verse that Jesus escaped the crucifixion, in the absence of any historical reports of a different interpretation. It is not the *cause* for understanding 4:157 as meaning that Jesus was not crucified, but it is its *result*. To be sure, denying the crucifixion is derived from the statement "They did not kill him, nor did they crucify him," whereas the speculations about substitutionism attempt to interpret the appearance statement, "it was made to appear so to them," which is thought to explain how the Jews wrongly thought that they crucified Jesus. The substitution theory, then, is an attempt to explain how this confusion happened. Had there been any historical report available to the first generation of Muslims or had they had any doubts that 4:157 did not deny Jesus' crucifixion, exegetes would have introduced relevant narratives to explain the appearance statement. No such narratives exist.

Verse 4:157 then goes on to say, “Those who differ over it are in doubt about it.” The subject of this difference is the clarification just mentioned in the verse, i.e., that Jesus was not killed or crucified but that the claimants wrongly thought so. The verse explains that the Jews’ claim is not based on certainty, suggesting that they did not ascertain that they did indeed kill him. They tried to kill him, but they failed; their claim to the contrary was not based on sufficient evidence. The non-crucifixion verse concludes by reiterating its earlier statement that Jesus’ enemies failed to kill him.

Breaking verse 4:157 up into its constituent statements further shows that it explicitly and unambiguously denies the historicity of this event:

- 1 The Jews’ claim is stated: “We have killed the Messiah, Jesus, the son of Mary, the messenger of Allah”.
- 2 The claim is unambiguously denied: “They did not kill him, nor did they crucify him.”
- 3 The Jews’ confusion is explained: “But it was made to appear so to them.”
- 4 Those who argue that Jesus was crucified are not certain about their claim: “Those who differ over it are in doubt about it.”
- 5 Their claim is not based on factual information but guessing and speculation: “They have no knowledge of it except the following of conjecture.”
- 6 The verse concludes with another firm confirmation that the claim is false and is not based on certainty: “They did not kill him with certainty.” (4:157)

Statements 1, 2, and 3 have this general structure, respectively: *they claim they did X; they did neither X nor Y; but it appeared to them that they did*. This simple breakdown of the structure of the first half of the verse further shows that it could not have been any clearer in denying the substance of the Jewish claim. If these three *negations* of the claim that the Jews killed or crucified Jesus are somehow read as *confirmation* of his crucifixion, as some have claimed, then there would be hardly any verse in the Qur’an that cannot be claimed to mean the exact opposite of what it appears to say. I would argue that such disregard for the basics

of Arabic would make the Qur'an unintelligible. It is difficult to think of another Qur'anic verse that has been subjected to such astonishing reversing of meaning.

Finally, I should add a note about the Arabic word root *ṣ-l-b*, which is ubiquitously translated as “crucify.” This word appears in the Qur'an in a verbal form six times (al-Nisā' 4:157; al-Ma'ida 5:33; al-A'rāf 7:124; Yūsuf 12:41; Ṭāhā 20:71; al-Shu'arā' 26:49). In one instance, Pharaoh makes this threat to the magicians who accepted Moses' claim to being God's messenger:

I will surely cut off your hands and your feet on opposite sides,  
and I will crucify you (*uṣallibannakum*) on the trunks of palm  
trees. (Ṭāhā 20:71)

This use may indicate that *ṣ-l-b* means some kind of execution by suspension. There is some debate about how Jesus was crucified, whether he was nailed to a cross, and what shape it had, or was suspended until he died. One scholar has argued that the popular image of Jesus nailed on a cross formed by a horizontal beam affixed at a right angle to an upright post is a Christian interpretation of the sparse descriptions in the Gospels of Jesus' execution by suspension, various forms of which existed in antiquity.<sup>87</sup> This claim of ambiguity, however, is rejected by others. One study points out that Greco-Roman texts of crucifixion share many similarities with the Gospel narratives of the crucifixion of Jesus, although the latter are more detailed than other surviving crucifixion accounts.<sup>88</sup> A third approach that falls between these two extremes states that crucifixion on a cross was likely one specific form within the broader category of human bodily suspension. The author argues that “this dynamic goes a long way to explain how general references in the Hebrew Bible to suspended bodies could later be associated more specifically with crucifixion terminology.”<sup>89</sup>

By the time of the Qur'an, the classical interpretation of the crucifixion of Jesus using a T-shaped cross or a variation of it was already long established. So, the crucifixion that is rejected in 4:157 seems to be the commonly accepted image of the execution of Jesus.

Following on from the confirmation of 4:157 that Jesus was not killed or crucified, verse 4.158 goes on to explain what happened to him: “Allah raised him to Himself.” Using the word “rather” (*bal*) to describe God’s raising of Jesus as a corrective fact to the Jews’ misconception that they killed him is another confirmation that 4:157 indicates the failure of their attempt on Jesus’ life. The word “but” is used in 4:157 to contrast the fact that the Jews did not kill Jesus with their contrary claim, and “rather” is used in 4.158 to contrast God’s raising of Jesus with the Jews’ uncertain claim of having killed him. The verse’s use of “invincible” to describe God may also be read as another confirmation that the divine will to rescue Jesus prevailed over the scheming of those who wanted to crucify him.<sup>90</sup>

## Conclusion

Over the centuries, Muslim and non-Muslim writers have shown an almost total consensus that the Qur’an denies the crucifixion of Jesus. There is no indication whatsoever that the Prophet or early Muslims thought otherwise. This is explained by the fact that verse 4:157, its context, and the broader Qur’anic narrative can only indicate that Jesus was not crucified. Any suggestion that the Qur’an is neutral on, let alone confirms, the historicity of Jesus’ crucifixion, as a minority of early Ismā‘īlīs and modern scholars have suggested, would have to not only present convincing evidence to this effect but also explain away the many different textual and historical indications that seem to reject it. Additionally, any such attempt would also make the text look open to completely contradictory and random interpretations, making it effectively incomprehensible. The recent suggestion that 4:157 is a response to the Talmud lacks any evidence while having strong counterarguments. The same is true of the attempts to trace the Qur’an’s denial of the crucifixion to docetism.

The attempt to deny the Qur’an’s rejection of the historicity of the crucifixion of Jesus is partly the result of the dominant trend that Angelika Neuwirth has identified and rightly criticised, which is the overfocus on the development process of the Qur’an from its presumed sources at the cost of paying due attention to the text itself. As she has put it, the focus should be “not the circumstances of the event of the Qur’an, but the text itself.”<sup>91</sup>

## Endnotes

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