Did the Crucifixion Really Happen? A Response to Islam's Denial

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"However, they did not slay him, and neither did they crucify him, but it only seemed to them [as if it had been] so."[1]

— Muhammad Asad, The Message of the Qur'an, on Surah An-Nisa 4:157

Introduction

When it comes to the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, the only thing Christianity and Islam agree on is that the Gospels report a crucifixion. According to the Qur'an, it never actually happened to Jesus. He was never taken into custody and hung on the cross. This denial isn't just a parenthetical statement in Islamic teaching; it cuts straight to the center of Christianity. If Jesus was never crucified, he was never raised, and the resurrection collapses before the case for it even gets started, leaving Christianity exposed as false.

Muslim scholars themselves disagree on how the crucifixion was avoided, and their separate accounts do not align with each other. Classical *tafsir* teaches Jesus was never on the cross — Allah made a volunteer resemble him, and that man died in his place, and Jesus was taken up to heaven untouched, through a hole in the roof. Modern Islamic apologists like Ahmed Deedat and Shabir Ally reject that account entirely and argue instead that Jesus really was crucified, but survived the ordeal.

Both explanations fail on their own terms when weighed against Christian and non-Christian testimonies — non-Christian historians, in particular, had every reason to dismiss the movement rather than confirm it. But Islamic theories also fail each other before the evidence even gets a say: substitution requires that Jesus was never on the cross. Swoon requires that he was, and survived it. Islam cannot consistently argue both. What follows examines the Qur'anic denial and its two competing explanations, weighs both against the historical record, and shows that even setting the evidence aside entirely, the substitution theory traps Islam in a theological problem of its own making.

The Objection Stated

The Qur'anic Text and Classical Tafsir

Muslim scholars debate exactly how the crucifixion was avoided, but the denial itself traces back to the Qur'an. In Surah An-Nisa 4:157–158, the Qur'an responds to the Jews' boast that they had killed "the Messiah, Jesus, the son of Mary, the messenger of Allah" by stating that "they did not kill him, nor did they crucify him; but [another] was made to resemble him to them."[2] The Qur'an goes on to say that "Allah raised him to Himself."[3] This denial is elaborated further in a

[1] Muhammad Asad, The Message of the Qur'an (Gibraltar: Dar al-Andalus, 1980), commentary on Surah An-Nisa 4:157.
[2] Qur'an 4:157, trans. Sahih International, Quran.com, accessed August 2026, https://quran.com/en/an-nisa/157-158.
[3] Qur'an 4:158, trans. Sahih International, Quran.com, accessed August 2026, https://quran.com/en/an-nisa/157-158.

later commentary tradition called *tafsir* — Qur'anic exegesis — most influentially in the *Tafsir al-Qur'an al-'Azim* of Ibn Kathir, a fourteenth-century Islamic exegete and historian.

Ibn Kathir's *tafsir* on 4:157 preserves a fuller narrative of what supposedly happened, and one detail in it is historically anachronistic: it reports that the Jews "went to the king of Damascus at that time, a Greek polytheist who worshipped the stars," who then ordered Jesus's arrest and crucifixion.[4] No such figure had jurisdiction over Jerusalem; both the Gospels and the independent Roman sources examined in Section III place Jesus's trial and execution under Pontius Pilate, the Roman prefect of Judea — not before a king ruling from Damascus.[5]

According to the t*afsir's* own account of what happened next, Jesus was never actually crucified — a companion died in his place. As soldiers surrounded the house where he was staying, Jesus asked, "Who volunteers to be made to look like me, for which he will be my companion in Paradise?" A young man volunteered, but Jesus judged him too young. The *tafsir* reports that Jesus asked twice more, and each time the same young man came forward, until Jesus finally accepted him: "Well then, you will be that man." Allah then made the volunteer resemble Jesus exactly, while Jesus himself was "made to sleep and ascended to heaven while asleep" through a hole that opened in the roof, leaving the volunteer behind to be arrested and crucified in his place.[6]

Even though the Qur'an and its earliest commentary tradition agree on this account — that Jesus was never crucified, never died, and was taken bodily to heaven — that agreement has not stopped later Muslim apologists from proposing very different explanations of the same event, as the next section shows.

Ahmed Deedat's Swoon Theory

Ahmed Deedat was an Islamic scholar and apologist. He advocated for the swoon theory: the claim that Jesus's crucifixion was a botched execution. Deedat argued that Jesus was on the cross for about three hours, too brief a time, historically, to have killed him, and that even Pilate was surprised at how quickly he died. He also pointed to the spear that pierced Jesus's side: rather than proving Jesus was dead, Deedat argued the resulting flow of blood showed his heart was still beating.[7] He pointed out too that the soldiers broke the legs of the two men crucified beside Jesus but left his unbroken, arguing this showed Jesus was already less injured than the other two. Throughout this ordeal, Jesus lapsed into a deep, death-like faint (swoon) from the fatigue and shock, causing the Romans to believe Jesus was dead. He was then carried to the tomb,

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[4]Ibn Kathīr, Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-'Aẓīm, commentary on Surah An-Nisa 4:157, in Tafsir Ibn Kathir (abridged trans.), Quran.com, accessed August 2026, https://quran.com/an-nisa/157/tafsirs/en-tafisr-ibn-kathir.

[5]Flavius Josephus, Jewish Antiquities 18.3.3; Cornelius Tacitus, Annals 15.44 — both discussed more fully in Section III below.

[6]Ibn Kathīr, commentary on Surah An-Nisa 4:157.

[7]Ahmed Deedat, Crucifixion or Cruci-Fiction? (Durban, South Africa: Islamic Propagation Centre International, n.d.), chap. 8, "God's Ways Are Not Our Ways," and chap. 10, "Sympathy for Jesus" — the latter citing Dean Farrar's estimate that Jesus was on the cross only about three hours, and Mark 15:44 (Pilate "marveled if he were already dead"). Accessed via https://d1.islamhouse.com/data/en/ih_books/single/en_Crucifixion_Or_Cruci-fiction.pdf.

where he regained consciousness and recovered. The appearances to his disciples, on Deedat's reading, were cases of physical resuscitation rather than a miraculous resurrection[8].

Shabir Ally's "Rescued" Variant

Shabir Ally, an Islamic Scholar, advocates a similar account of the crucifixion to Deedat's, but with some differences. Like Deedat, Ally argues "Jesus was not on the cross for more than a few hours" and that "crucifixion pierces no vital organ."[9] Here is where the similarities with Deedat's view end. After being pierced, Pilate is surprised at how quickly Jesus died, as evidence shows people were known to survive crucifixion, especially with medical attention.

Ally reinterprets the Qur'anic denial itself. He argues the Arabic term for crucifixion in the Qur'an is *salb*, specifically meaning "to kill by means of crucifixion."[10] So Ayat 4:157's denial – they did not kill him…nor did they crucify him – should, on his reading, be understood to mean only that they failed to kill Jesus by that particular method, not that he was never physically placed on the cross.[11] This causes a discrepancy in Islamic thought concerning the crucifixion, as Ibn Kathir, in the *tafsir*, states Jesus was never placed on the cross, as a young man took his place.

After Jesus is taken down from the cross, he is assumed to heaven – not years of an ordinary life, as Deedat claimed. Ally holds that Jesus was taken down from the cross alive and ascended directly to heaven from the tomb.[12] Here he draws an explicit comparison to the assumption of Enoch and Elijah into heaven. His appearances were visions, and not physical encounters. Ally originally proposes "only one such appearance"[13] – a vision Allah gave the disciples to reassure them Jesus was alive with Him. Later appearances in the Gospels are added embellishments.

Historical Corroboration

Extrabiblical Attestation to the Crucifixion

We have just seen that Islam denies the death and resurrection of Jesus; both the Qur'an and *tafsir* are clear about that. We also looked at two variant Islamic theories of the crucifixion. However, how do these arguments hold up under historical scrutiny? Let's see what two of the most prominent ancient Roman historians – Josephus & Tacitus – have to say about the matter.

Josephus, in his book *Antiquities of the Jews* (written around AD 93), corroborates the biblical account. "Now, there was about this time, Jesus… and when Pilate, at the suggestion of the principal men amongst us, had condemned him to the cross…"[14] This is not the only place where Jesus is referenced in this book. In Chapter XX, we see James is mentioned as the brother of Jesus; "so he assembled the Sanhedrim of judges, and brought before them the brother of Jesus,

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[8]Deedat, Crucifixion or Cruci-Fiction? chap. 12, "Disciples Disbelieved," and chap. 14, "Jesus Not Resurrected."
[9] Shabir Ally, "Did Jesus Physically Rise from the Dead?" Shabir Ally's Responses (blog), April 12, 2009, https://shabirally.wordpress.com/2009/04/12/did-jesus-physically-rise-from-the-dead/.
[10] Ally, "Did Jesus Physically Rise from the Dead?"
[11] Ally, "Did Jesus Physically Rise from the Dead?"
[12] Ally, "Did Jesus Physically Rise from the Dead?"
[13] Ally, "Did Jesus Physically Rise from the Dead?"
[14] Flavius Josephus, Jewish Antiquities 18.3.3, in The New Complete Works of Josephus, trans. William Whiston, rev. Paul L. Maier (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1999), 379.

who was called the Christ, whose name is James."[15] These are extra-biblical accounts of Jesus that corroborate the biblical account of James as Jesus's brother and of Jesus's crucifixion under Pontius Pilate.

Tacitus is widely regarded as one of the greatest historians of ancient Rome, and because he had every reason to overlook or dismiss the Christian movement rather than confirm it, his testimony is especially valuable. His works, *Annals* and *the Histories*, offer a critique of imperial power and political corruption. Beyond being a historian, Tacitus was also a Roman senator who despised Christianity. In the *Annals* (written around AD 116), he describes Christianity as "mischievous superstition" and refers to its followers as a people hated for their "abominations."[16] Yet despite this hostility, Tacitus provides another piece of evidence corroborating the biblical account that Jesus was crucified under Pontius Pilate. Here, Tacitus discusses Nero's persecution of Christians after the Great Fire of Rome: "…Nero fastened the guilt and inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class hated for their abominations, called Christians by the populace. Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus…"[17] Tacitus, who despised Christianity, nevertheless confirms in his own writing the biblical account that Jesus was crucified under Pontius Pilate.

The Earliest Christian Testimony

The final piece of evidence we will look at as proof of Jesus's crucifixion and resurrection comes from the Bible itself — specifically, an early creed embedded in 1 Corinthians 15:3-4 that predates the letter itself and closes the gap between the event and its earliest written testimony to just a few years. One may wonder why we do not instead reference the Gospels. As Dr. Licona explains in his book *The Resurrection of Jesus: A New Historiographical Approach*, we have two good reasons for referring to 1 Corinthians. First, 1 Corinthians is believed to have been written in either A.D. 54 or 55. This is one of the earliest attestations we have to the crucifixion and resurrection narrative, written within 25 years of the event. Secondly, within the epistle, we have an early Christian creed: "For I passed on to you as of first importance what I also received—that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day according to the scriptures" (1 Cor. 15:3-4, NET).[18] This creed that Paul inserts here was passed down to him either by the Damascus disciples (Acts 9:1-19) or by his meeting with Peter, James, and the Jerusalem disciples (Galatians 1:18-19, 2:1-10). This creed predates the book and puts us even closer to the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus.[19]

The Denial Examined: Internal Problems and Historical Rebuttal

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[15] Josephus, Antiquities 20.9.1, in The New Complete Works of Josephus, 423.
[16] Cornelius Tacitus, Annals 15.44, trans. Alfred John Church and William Jackson Brodribb (London: Macmillan, 1876), Perseus Digital Library, accessed September 2026, http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:text:1999.02.0078:book=15:chapter=44.
[17] Tacitus, Annals 15.44.
[18] 1 Corinthians 15:3-4 (NET Bible). Scripture quoted by permission. Quotations designated (NET) are from the NET Bible® copyright ©1996, 2019 by Biblical Studies Press, L.L.C. All rights reserved.
[19] Mike Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus: A New Historiographical Approach* (Downers Grove, Ill. : Nottingham, England: IVP Academic; Apollos, 2010), 223–235.

Responding to Deedat's and Ally's Specific Evidence

Deedat and Ally both build their case for Jesus's survival on a handful of specific claims. None of these claims hold up once we look at the wider historical and forensic evidence.

First, the three hours on the cross. Deedat treats this like crucifixion ran on a fixed clock, but it didn't: death could come within hours or take several days, depending on the shape the victim was in before he was ever nailed to the cross. Ally is right that crucifixion itself doesn't strike a vital organ — it kills through suffocation — but that's not the whole story with Jesus. He was severely scourged first, and a widely cited 1986 study in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* concludes that the blood loss from the scourging, combined with the exhaustion of hanging on the cross, meant "death resulted primarily from hypovolemic shock and exhaustion asphyxia."[20] Seeing all that he endured prior to being crucified, three hours was a lifetime of suffocating, shock, and pain.

Second, the unbroken legs. John's Gospel tells us the soldiers broke the legs of the two men crucified next to Jesus, "but when they came to Jesus and saw that he was already dead, they did not break his legs" (John 19:33, NET).[21] Breaking a crucified man's legs (crurifragium) was how the Romans sped up death — it took away the victim's ability to push himself up to breathe. Deedat reads the absence of this in Jesus's case as a sign he was less injured than the other two. It's actually the opposite. These soldiers broke legs for a living. They had every reason to make sure no one walked away alive, and they looked at Jesus and decided it wasn't necessary.

Third, Pilate's surprise. Deedat treats this as if Pilate doubted Jesus was dead at all. But look at what the text actually says: "Pilate was surprised that he was already dead. He called the centurion and asked him if he had been dead for some time" (Mark 15:44, NET).[22] The surprise is about the speed of death, not whether it happened. And Pilate didn't just take Joseph of Arimathea's word for it — he called in the centurion who ran the execution, and released the body once that centurion confirmed Jesus's death. That's verification, not doubt.

Fourth, the spear wound. John tells us, "but one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and blood and water flowed out immediately" (John 19:34, NET).[23] Deedat takes this as proof that Jesus's heart was still beating. Modern forensic medicine says the opposite: the separation of blood and clear fluid matches the fluid that builds up around the heart and lungs in the hours after death from this kind of trauma, not a beating heart.[24] The detail Deedat points to as evidence of life is, medically speaking, evidence of death.

Ally's account also depends on the resurrection appearances being visions rather than physical encounters, but the Gospel accounts push back on that directly. The risen Jesus eats in front of the disciples (Luke 24:42–43, NET), invites Thomas to touch his wounds (John 20:27, NET), and appears to more than five hundred people at once — most of whom, Paul says, were still alive and could be asked about it themselves (1 Cor. 15:6, NET). A vision does not eat, cannot be touched, and does not appear to hundreds of people simultaneously in a way witnesses could

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[20] William D. Edwards, Wesley J. Gabel, and Floyd E. Hosmer, "On the Physical Death of Jesus Christ," JAMA 255, no. 11 (March 21, 1986): 1455-1463.
[21] John 19:33 (NET Bible).
[22] Mark 15:44 (NET Bible).
[23] John 19:34 (NET Bible).
[24] Edwards, Gabel, and Hosmer, "On the Physical Death of Jesus Christ," 1463.

later be cross-examined about. Dr. Licona raises the same problem against the hallucination hypothesis some skeptical scholars propose: hallucinations, like visions, are private and don't produce shared, simultaneous group experiences, let alone physical contact.[25]

We're not the first to say so. Habermas and Licona raise three of their own objections to the swoon theory: the scourging, crucifixion, and spear wound together were too much trauma to survive; a beaten, barely-alive Jesus could hardly have rolled away the tomb's stone or convinced his disciples he had beaten death rather than just barely escaped it; and the theory can't explain Paul's conversion, since Paul describes meeting a gloriously risen Christ, not a wounded survivor.[26]

Habermas and Licona's first objection actually understates the difficulty. It isn't just that the combined trauma of scourging, crucifixion, and the spear wound was severe enough to threaten survival – it's that a man who somehow survived all of it would still need to do more than merely survive. Within about thirty-six hours, with no medical attention beyond a sealed, guarded tomb, he would need to show up to his disciples looking not like someone who had barely escaped death, but gloriously alive and worthy of worship as the risen Lord. That problem applies just as much to Deedat's account as it does to Ally's more "medical" version of the same theory. Neither one explains how this kind of trauma could produce not a survivor, but the appearance of a conqueror.

The Two Theories Refute Each Other

Beyond the specific evidence above, there is also an internal problem within these two objections. Substitution and swoon cannot both be correct. Substitution requires that Jesus was never actually on the cross – Allah made a young man look like Jesus and put him on the cross. Swoon requires that Jesus was actually crucified and survived the ordeal. These are not two versions of the same idea; they cancel each other out. Deedat cannot accept the "survival" claim that Ally presents, since, in his account, there is no survivor; someone besides Jesus died on the cross. Ally has to throw out Deedat's whole premise, since his case depends on Jesus actually hanging on the cross. Islam can raise substitution against resurrection, or it can raise swoon; but it cannot raise them both without contradicting itself.

The Theological Dilemma of a Deceiving Allah

There is a deeper issue we must dissect within the substitution theory, one that has nothing to do with medical evidence or eyewitness accounts but creates a huge dilemma for Islam. If we grant Ibn Kathir's account, word for word, as the *tafsir* tells it – Allah making a volunteer appear to look like Jesus and pulling Jesus to safety via a hole in the roof – the theory creates a problem Islam cannot escape: a theological dilemma.

If Allah orchestrated the substitution, he didn't just save Jesus. He deceived everyone who witnessed the crucifixion, including Jesus's disciples and his mother, into believing that Jesus died on the cross. This lie was not contained either; the disciples went on to preach, and later write, that Jesus was crucified and resurrected, bodily from the dead – the very claim that

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[25] Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus*, 483–491.

[26] Gary R. Habermas and Mike Licona, The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2004), chap. 5, "Always Looking for a Way Out: Of Legends, Lies, and Lapses," 99-103.

Christianity lives by.[27] From Islam's own perspective, it's a central error. If the substitution theory is true, Allah didn't merely permit that error; he's guilty of producing it.

This leaves Islam with two options: either Allah is the immediate cause of Christianity's founding and central claim – the very claim Islam considers idolatrous – or Allah watched that claim spread across the Roman world for six hundred years, unchallenged, before finally correcting it through Muhammad and the Qur'an. An Allah who authors the deception is responsible for what Islam calls the world's greatest theological error. An Allah who merely permits it and stays silent for six centuries while it grows into a global phenomenon isn't the Allah of the Qur'an – one who guides, warns, and corrects.[28] Substitution theory doesn't just fail; it puts Allah in the position of either causing or ignoring the very heresy Islam claims to correct.[29]

Conclusion

As we have seen, the only point Islam agrees with in regard to the crucifixion is that Jesus did not die and there was no resurrection afterward. The Qur'an and *tafsir* are clear that Jesus was only made to appear crucified to onlookers.[30] The *tafsir* goes on to say that someone volunteered to be crucified in Jesus's place, and that Allah made this volunteer look exactly like Jesus.[31] So according to Islam's holy writ, Jesus was not crucified, and someone else was in his place.

However, despite the Qur'an and *tafsir* setting forth the doctrine, Muslim scholars still debate the issue. Deedat and Ally both argue against the Qur'an and *tafsir*, stating that Jesus was actually crucified. However, Deedat states that Jesus was carried to the tomb, where he healed, and once he recovered, he made appearances. Ally states that Jesus was crucified, but he did not die on the cross, and once he was taken down, Allah assumed him to heaven.

But when we look at the extra-biblical historical data, we see independent, non-Christian historians and government officials clearly corroborate the biblical account that Jesus was crucified under Pontius Pilate, and he died on the cross. We saw one of the earliest New Testament writings and the creed embedded within it record not only the crucifixion and death of Jesus, but also his resurrection (1 Cor. 15:3-4). Lastly, we saw inconsistencies in Islamic thought regarding the crucifixion.

Responding to Deedat's and Ally's arguments, we see that Jesus, after what he endured, did die in 3 hours while he hung from the cross. His unbroken legs were the judgment by the Roman soldiers that Jesus was dead. Pilate's reaction was to the speed of his death, not that death actually occurred. The spear wound of blood and water, according to modern medical literature, affirms that Jesus was indeed dead on the cross. Finally, the brutality of Jesus's torture from scourging, then being hung on a cross, and being pierced by the spear in the chest, followed by his presenting to the disciples within days as (per the earliest testimony) gloriously alive and

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[27] 1 Corinthians 15:14 (NET Bible).
[28] Qur'an 2:213; 3:28, trans. Sahih International, Quran.com, accessed September 2026, https://quran.com/en/al-baqarah/213; https://quran.com/en/al-imran/28.
[29] Luke Wayne, "Islam and the Crucifixion: A Theological Dilemma," CARM (Christian Apologetics & Research Ministry), July 6, 2017, https://carm.org/islam-and-the-crucifixion-a-theological-dilemma.
[30] Qur'an 4:157.
[31] Ibn Kathīr, commentary on Surah An-Nisa 4:157.

worthy of worship as risen Lord — without any medical care beyond a sealed, guarded tomb — poses a problem for Deedat's account and for Ally's more medically framed variant alike.

This shows us that, from the specific evidence above, the same discrepancies already hinted at in Ally's reinterpretation of the Qur'an and in substitution and swoon theories cannot both be correct. One requires that Jesus was on the cross; the other requires that he was never on the cross.

Finally, the biggest issue here is the dilemma Islam faces. If Allah actively deceived the people into believing Jesus died and rose from the dead, Allah becomes the proximate cause of the very belief Islam calls the greatest sin (shirk), worshipping Jesus as God. This persisted and went unchecked for six centuries. If, on the other hand, Allah did not engineer this lie and the people were simply mistaken, then an all-knowing and all-powerful God allowed the single greatest theological error in history to create a religion that spread across the world.

Within Islamic doctrines and teachings, their view of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus has too many ad hoc components and inconsistencies to be plausible. The most plausible of all explanations is the one that has been orthodox teaching within Christendom for nearly two thousand years: that Jesus was crucified under Pontius Pilate, died and was buried, and on the third day arose from the dead (bodily) and appeared to numerous eyewitnesses.



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