

Christ, the Qur'an, and the Cross

Hebrews 10:1–18

Good Friday 2016

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THIS Good Friday I thought it would edifying not merely to proclaim the cross of Christ but to do so in the context of what the religion of Islam says about the cross of Christ. This is important as we more and more come into contact with Muslim neighbors. As one Muslim *imam*—that’s their word for a “cleric”—said in the media a while back, “We believe in Jesus, more than you do in fact.”¹

The Christ of the Qur'an

Who is Jesus Christ according to the Qur'an, the holy book of Islam? Areas we agree with are that *Jesus Christ was born of the Virgin Mary* (3:47; cf. 19:21–22), although the Qur'an does not say this happened by means of the the Holy Spirit. The virgin birth was an act of Allah’s sheer will alone. *Jesus Christ was a human being* (5:75; 43:59). We agree with this, although, as we’ll see, we believe he is much, much more. *Jesus Christ was a righteous prophet* like Zachariah—the father of John the Baptist—John the Baptist, and Elijah (6:85; cf. 3:45–46), whose purpose was to confirm the Torah and to

¹ Imam Fisal Hammouda, in an interview with Bill Hybels. Cited at http://www.christian-witness.org/not_in_pubs/willowc_islam.htm (Accessed March 22, 2016).

bring the gospel (5:46; 61:6). And *Jesus Christ performed miracles* as did the prophets of old (3:48–51).

Yet this is not all the Qur'an says. It's what it denies that is so important. The Qur'an says that *Jesus Christ was not and is not God*. Because of this we who say so are under Allah's curse (9:30; cf. 43:64; 5:116).² And focusing in on the occasion for tonight's service, the Qur'an says that *Jesus Christ was not crucified*. Instead, "in the eyes of his enemies . . . was crucified."³ While the enemies of Jesus thought they saw him on the cross, Jesus was caught up to Allah (3:55; 4:157–158).

Why is this so important? Without a crucifixion, there is no resurrection. Without a resurrection, Jesus is not the Savior. If Jesus is not the Savior, we are still dead in our sins.

The Cross of Christ

He did die, after all; that's a fact. The Qur'an makes its claim in the face of history. We have the *New Testament manuscripts themselves*. There are more than one thousand times more manuscript data for the New

² All quotations from the Qur'an come from *The Holy Qur-an: English Translation of the Meanings and Commentary* rev. and ed. The Presidency of Islamic Researches, IFTA, Call and Guidance (King Fahd Holy Qur-an Printing Complex).

³ *Qur'an* 154, f.n. 388.

Testament than for the average ancient Greco-Roman author. The extant manuscripts of those authors is no earlier than five hundred years after the time they wrote. The New Testament manuscripts are a mere decades after the events they record. For example, Tacitus, the greatest Roman historian died in 120 AD. The earliest manuscript of his is from the ninth century, yet we take what he wrote as factual and historical. And guess how many manuscripts of his there are? Three. We have five thousand seven hundred Greek New Testament manuscripts, ten thousand Latin manuscripts, and over one million known references to the New Testament in the ancient church fathers.

The fact of his death is mentioned by ancient Jewish and Gentile philosophers, poets, and politicians. The *Jewish rabbis* did not deny that Jesus lived and was crucified; in fact, they positively stated that he was crucified in the Talmud, the authoritative tradition of their sayings and teachings. The Talmud says, “On the eve of Passover they hung Jeshu the Nazarine...for sorcery...and enticing Israel.”⁴ As well, in the early debates between Christians and Jews such as between Justin Martyr and Trypho the Jew around 150 AD., Trypho never denies the existence of Jesus.

⁴ See David Instone-Brewer, “Jesus of Nazareth’s Trial in the Uncensored Talmud.” *Tyndale Bulletin* 62.2 (November 2011): 269–294.

Ancient *Roman historians* never deny the existence or crucifixion of Jesus'. In fact, Josephus⁵ writing around 93–94 AD, said,

And when Pilate, at the suggestion of the principal men amongst us, had condemned him to the cross, those that loved him at the first did not forsake him (18.3.3).

The Roman Empire's greatest historian was Cornelius Tacitus. In 116 AD he wrote his monumental *Annals*. In one passage he spoke of the great fire of Rome in 64 AD and Caesar Nero's reaction to it: "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."⁶

Ancient *anti-Christian philosophers* positively stated that Jesus was crucified. Sometime after 73AD a Stoic philosopher named Mara bar Serapion wrote a letter from prison to his son, asking,

What advantage did the Jews gain from executing their wise King? It was just after that their kingdom was abolished...the Jews, ruined and driven from their land, live in complete dispersion...Nor did the wise King die for good; he lived on in the teaching he had given.⁷

⁵ 18.3.3.

⁶ 15.44.

⁷ Cited in F. F. Bruce, *Jesus and Christian Origins Outside the New Testament* (1974; repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 31.

Another ancient anti-Christian philosopher and writer was Lucian of Samosata (125–180). In a tribute to a Cynic philosopher in a writing called *The Passing of Peregrinus*, he not only derided Christians, but he said why: they worshipped “the man who was crucified in Palestine” (§11). He went on to describe Christianity as “denying the Greek gods and [...] worshipping that crucified sophist himself” (§13).⁸

Even the highly skeptical co-founder of the “Jesus Seminar,” John Dominic Crossan, concludes, “That [Jesus] was crucified is as sure as anything historical can ever be.”⁹ Similarly, the atheist New Testament critic, Gerd Lüdemann, writes, “Jesus' death as a consequence of crucifixion is indisputable.”¹⁰

The Christ of the Cross

Why is this all so important? In contrast to Islam, Jesus Christ is the Savior of humanity by his death and resurrection. Hebrews 10 points this out in several key clauses. In verse 10 we read that the Son came to do the will of God: **And by that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.** As the Old Testament teaches, the

⁸ <http://www.tertullian.org/rpearse/lucian/peregrinus.htm>

⁹ John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991), 145.

¹⁰ Gerd Lüdemann. *The Resurrection of Christ* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 2004), 50.

only for priests and people to be made acceptable to God is through sacrifice. Jesus is that final sacrifice. Again in verse 12 we read that **Christ...offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins** and after that he rose again and **sat down at the right hand of God**. Finally, in verse 14 we read the eternal benefit of this sacrifice: **For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified**. Jesus saves us **for all time**. Amen.