

# Using the Death of Jesus to Refute Islam

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Prior to 9/11, few Americans thought about Islam. Since then, Muslims have made front page news almost daily. A number of Christian apologists and scholars, such as Joshua Lingel, Sam Shamoun, Jay Smith, and David Wood, have stepped up to the plate and interacted seriously with Islam's truth claims. In this essay, I wish to argue that Jesus' first century fate is an effective challenge to, and even a refutation of, Islam.

## *The Problem*

The death and resurrection of Jesus have a monumental presence within the writings of the New Testament. Jesus asserted that his resurrection from the dead would be proof that he is who he claimed to be (Matt. 12:38-40; Luke 11:29-30; John 2:18-22). Accordingly, without Jesus' death, there is no atonement and no resurrection. In that case, according to Paul, our faith is worthless, we will still be judged for our sins, and those friends and family members who have died as Christians are forever lost (1 Cor. 15:17-18). Islam asserts that Jesus did not die in the first century. Because Jesus' death plays a very major role in the apostolic preaching, if Jesus did not die, apostolic Christianity is gravely mistaken.

## *The Muslim View*

The *Qur'an* clearly denies the first century death of Jesus:

And because of their saying: We slew the Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, Allah's messenger - they slew him not nor crucified him, but it appeared so unto them; and lo! those who disagree concerning it are in doubt thereof; they have no knowledge thereof save pursuit of a conjecture; they slew him not for certain. But Allah took him up unto Himself. Allah was ever Mighty, Wise. (4:157-58, Pickthall's translation)

The *Gospel of Barnabas* (GB) provides a narrative of what actually occurred as Muslims view the events. Upon being alerted that others had come to arrest him, Jesus retreated in hiding to a room. At God's command, four angels took Jesus up into heaven. When Judas entered the room in which Jesus had been hiding, God changed both his voice and his appearance to be the same as those of Jesus. Those who had come to arrest Jesus found Judas and took him instead.<sup>1</sup> All of Jesus' disciples—including the author Barnabas—his mother, his family, and friends were all convinced Jesus had been arrested and killed. Nicodemus and Joseph of Abarimathea removed Judas's corpse from the cross and buried it in Joseph's new tomb.<sup>2</sup> However, a few impious disciples stole the body and proclaimed Jesus had been raised from the dead.<sup>3</sup>

In answer to Jesus' prayer while in heaven, God allows the four angels to return Jesus to earth where he meets his mother, Martha, Mary Magdalene, Lazarus, the author Barnabas, John, James, and Peter.<sup>4</sup> Jesus tells them that he did not die and calls upon the four angels to tell them what had actually occurred. Barnabas then asks Jesus why a merciful God allowed them to endure enormous grief from believing he was dead. Jesus answers that it was punishment because they did not love him enough and that it would save them from hell. Moreover, since some have called Jesus "God" and "Son of God," God has allowed others to believe that Jesus was killed so that humans would mock him in this world rather than demons mocking him on the

judgment day. However, Muhammad will come later and will reveal God's deception.<sup>5</sup>

Jesus then asks Barnabas to write the truth about what really happened to him so that "the faithful may be undeceived and every one may believe the truth." Then James and John brought the other "faithful disciples" to Jesus. These included seven disciples, Nicodemus, Joseph, and many of the seventy-two. Two days later, Jesus reproved those who believed he had died and been raised and reiterated that it was Judas who had actually been executed. "Beware, for Satan will make every effort to deceive you. Be my witnesses in Israel, and throughout the world, of all things that you have heard and seen." Then the four angels carried him back to heaven.<sup>6</sup>

The true disciples are then persecuted by those who preach lies, such as those who say that Jesus died but was not resurrected, those who say that Jesus died and was resurrected, and those like Paul who say that Jesus is the Son of God.<sup>7</sup>

Still another Muslim argument against Jesus' death by crucifixion concerns the Sign of Jonah provided by Jesus in Matthew 12:39-40:

For just as Jonah was in the belly of the sea-monster three days and three nights, in this manner the Son of Man will be in the heart of the earth three days and three nights. (translation mine)

Muslim apologists contend that, if Jesus' analogy is to be taken seriously, we must conclude that since Jonah did not die, neither did Jesus.

### *The Historical Evidence for Jesus' Death by Crucifixion*

For theists, the Muslim view is not impossible. For if God could have raised Jesus from the dead, he could just as easily have rescued him as described generally in the *Qur'an* or specifically in the *Gospel*

of Barnabas. However, the question is not *what God can do*, but rather *what God did*.

There are at least three reasons pertinent to our discussion for believing that Jesus of Nazareth died as a result of being crucified. First, *Jesus' death by crucifixion is multiply attested by a fair number of ancient sources, Christian and non-Christian alike*. It is very probable that Josephus reported the event in his original version of *Antiquities* 18:3.<sup>8</sup> Tacitus, Lucian, and Mara bar Serapion are all certainly aware of the event.<sup>9</sup> Lucian adds that Jesus' crucifixion took place in Palestine.<sup>10</sup> In Christian sources, Jesus' execution is widely reported, with and without specifying the mode of crucifixion. All four canonical Gospels report Jesus' death by crucifixion as do numerous other books and letters of the New Testament that refer to it regularly.<sup>11</sup> Jesus' death and/or crucifixion are abundantly mentioned in the non-canonical literature.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, there is no ancient evidence to the contrary.<sup>13</sup>

Second, *the reports of Jesus' death by crucifixion are early*. Paul mentions Jesus' death by crucifixion no later than AD 55 and said he preached the same to those in Corinth in AD 51 or within twenty-one years of Jesus' crucifixion.<sup>14</sup> Jesus' death may be alluded to in *Q*, which may be contemporary to Paul.<sup>15</sup> It appears numerous times in the *kerygma* of the oral formulas. The earliest report of Jesus' death is found in the tradition in 1 Corinthians 15:3. Virtually all scholars who have written on the subject hold that Paul here provides tradition about Jesus which he received from others.<sup>16</sup> There is likewise widespread agreement that it was composed very early, reflected what was being taught by the Jerusalem apostles, and is the oldest extant tradition pertaining to the resurrection of Jesus.<sup>17</sup> It is really quite amazing to think that we are probably reading what was taught by the original disciples of Jesus.

Third, *the reports of Jesus' death by crucifixion meet the criterion of embarrassment*. While there are a number of accounts of Jewish martyrs who all acted bravely under circumstances of extreme torture and execution,<sup>18</sup> reports of Jesus' arrest and martyrdom show a weaker and more human Jesus, one who could cause embarrassment in contrast.

When we come to the Passion narratives in the canonical Gospels, we find a number of traits shared with the other martyrdom

stories. Like all of the others, once arrested, Jesus stands bold in his convictions. In all, there are moments of great composure during their painful ordeals. Jesus offers a prayer to God as do Eleazar, Stephen, Polycarp, and Rabbi Akiba. Even Jesus' enemies are impressed with his behavior while under great duress (Mark 15:4-5, 39; Matt. 27:54; Luke 23:39-42, 47; John 19:7-12) as are those witnessing the martyrdoms of the seven brothers, Eleazar, Polycarp, Rabbi Akiba, and Rabbi Hanina ben Taradion.

However, the accounts of Jesus' martyrdom also differ significantly from the others. Whereas a number of the martyrdom reports seem constructed to provide encouragement to others who may face similar situations, the Passion narratives of Jesus provide no such encouragement. Jesus anguishes over his impending treatment and wants to avoid it if at all possible (Mark 14:32-42; Matt. 26:36-46; Luke 22:39-46). This would certainly not inspire those whom he had told to take up their own cross and follow him if they wanted to be his disciples (Mark 8:34; Matt. 16:24; Luke 9:23). Rather than proclaiming that he will not forsake God or his Law as did many of the Jewish martyrs, Jesus instead cries out asking why God has forsaken him (Mark 15:34; Matt. 27:46). Given the embarrassing nature of this comment from despair, it is unlikely to be an invention of the early Church.<sup>19</sup> In contrast, the words of the martyrs are often defiant: "Do whatever you want to me." "I will not forsake God's Law." "You will be punished by God." "I could have saved myself but did not for God's sake." "May my death be substitutionary." "Bring it on!" "Racks and stones may break my bones, but resurrection awaits me!" Instead of saying "God will punish you" (seven brothers, Polycarp), Jesus says, "Father, forgive them."<sup>20</sup>

We must keep in mind that only the reports of the seven brothers and Eleazar pre-date Jesus, while Stephen, Rabbi Akiba, Rabbi Hanina ben Taradion, and Polycarp post-date him. However, given Roman rule in Jerusalem which brutally crushed any suspicion of rebellion, reports of the seven brothers and Eleazar are likely to have been widely known there. If so, many of the differences between Jesus in the Passion narratives and the seven brothers and Eleazar must have stood out immediately to the early readers and would most likely have been quite embarrassing for Christians. For this reason, we get a sense

that in the canonical Gospels we are reading authentic reports of Jesus' arrest and death, even if a cleaning up or omission may have occurred to some of those embarrassing details by Luke and to all of them by John and even if some encomiastic elements were added.<sup>21</sup> Accordingly, the embarrassing elements in the Passion narratives weigh in favor of the presence of historical kernels. These include, most importantly in our investigation, Jesus' death by crucifixion.

While historians may be open to the possibility that Jesus survived his crucifixion, historians must be guided by probabilities. Given the strong evidence for Jesus' crucifixion, without good evidence to the contrary the historian must conclude that the process killed him. This is the conclusion shared by virtually all scholars who have studied the subject. McIntyre comments,

Even those scholars and critics who have been moved to depart from almost everything else within the historical content of Christ's presence on earth have found it impossible to think away the factuality of the death of Christ.<sup>22</sup>

McIntyre is quite correct. Atheist Gerhard Lüdemann writes, "Jesus' death as a consequence of crucifixion is indisputable."<sup>23</sup> For the Jewish scholar Vermes, "The passion of Jesus is part of history."<sup>24</sup> The rather skeptical scholar Paula Fredriksen writes, "The single most solid fact about Jesus' life is his death: he was executed by the Roman prefect Pilate, on or around Passover, in the manner Rome reserved particularly for political insurrectionists, namely, crucifixion."<sup>25</sup>

In summary, the historical evidence is very strong that Jesus died by crucifixion. The event is multiply attested by a number of ancient sources, some of which are non-Christian and, thus, not biased toward a Christian interpretation of events. They appear in multiple literary forms, being found in annals, historiography, biography, letters, and tradition in the form of creeds, oral formulae, and hymns. Some of the reports are very early and can reasonably be traced to the Jerusalem apostles. Finally, the Passion narratives appear credible, since they fulfill the criterion of embarrassment. That Jesus was crucified and

died as a result is granted by the overwhelming majority of scholars studying the subject.

## *Islamic Catch-22*

Despite the overwhelming historical evidence supporting Jesus' death by crucifixion, it seems to me that a Muslim might respond that this only demonstrates the truth of the *Qur'an*, since everyone was tricked into believing that Jesus had died as a result of being crucified just as the *Qur'an* and GB state. However, the Muslim view that God rescued Jesus from death comes at a high price that Muslims cannot pay. In his 1961 novel *Catch-22*, Joseph Heller described situations where no choice exists for achieving a desired outcome. This type of situation came to be referred to by the book's title, a "*Catch-22*." Given the *Qur'an's* view of Jesus' fate, Muslims are in what we may refer to as an "Islamic Catch-22."

We must start with the fact that Jesus predicted his imminent and violent death. There are at least six strong reasons in support. First, the accounts of the predictions are early, being found in abundance in Mark's Gospel, which most scholars believe was written somewhere between twenty-five to forty-five years after Jesus' death. There is also a hint of an Aramaic original in the passion prediction of Mark 9:31 where a *vorlage* presents a play on words: the *Son of Man* is to be handed over to the hands of men.<sup>26</sup>

Second, the passion and resurrection predictions are multiply attested, as the following tables show.<sup>27</sup>

### ***Table 1: Jesus Predicting His Death and Resurrection: Mark, Matthew, John***

#### *Mark*

- Related to Peter's rebuke: Mark 8:31; Matt. 16:21; Luke 9:22
- After Jesus' Transfiguration: Mark 9:9; Matt. 17:9
- Passing through Galilee: Mark 9:30-31; Matt. 17:22-23
- Going up to Jerusalem: Mark 10:33-34; Matt. 20:18-19
- Last Supper: Mark 14:18-28; Matt. 26:21-32; Luke 22:15-20

*Matthew*

- Sign of Jonah: Matt. 12:38-40 (cf. Luke 11:29-30); 16:2-4 (cf. Luke 12:54-56)<sup>28</sup>

*John*

- Related to Destruction of Temple: John 2:18-22 (cf. Mark 14:58; 15:29; Matt. 26:61-62)

***Table 2: Jesus Predicting His Death Only: Mark, Luke, John****Mark*

- Ransom for Many: Mark 10:45
- Vineyard and Wicked Tenants: Mark 12:1-12; Matt. 21:33-46; Luke 20:9-19
- Garden: Mark 14:32-40; Matt. 26:36-46; Luke 22:39-46

*Luke*

- Prophet Cannot Die Outside of Jerusalem: Luke 13:32-33

*John*

- Jesus Lifted Up: John 3:13-14; 8:28; 12:32-34

Even more importantly, the passion predictions appear in multiple literary forms, being found in logia involving parable (Mark 12:1-12) and simple didactic.<sup>29</sup>

Third, the passion and resurrection predictions fulfill the criterion of embarrassment. There is, in fact, a double embarrassment. In his garden prayer, Jesus “wants out” if possible (Mark 14:32-40; Matt. 26:36-46; Luke 22:39-46) and there is the embarrassing portrayal of the disciples who do not understand Jesus’ passion predictions or simply did not believe him (Mark 8:31-33; 9:31-32; 14:27-31; Luke 24:11, 21).<sup>30</sup> Of special interest is that in the midst of these predictions the first leader of the church is twice portrayed in a negative light.<sup>31</sup> Fourth, with only a few exceptions, the passion and resurrection predictions lack signs of possible theologizing by the early church.<sup>32</sup> For example, there is no reflection on the significance of Jesus’ death, such as its

atoning value.<sup>33</sup> Fifth, Jesus' passion and resurrection predictions are often located within Jesus' reference to himself as the "Son of Man."<sup>34</sup> Given the criterion of dissimilarity, the "Son of Man" appears to have been an authentic self-designation by Jesus.<sup>35</sup> The "Son of Man" logia appear in every Gospel layer and in multiple literary forms.<sup>36</sup> However, the later church did not refer to Jesus as the "Son of Man." Sixth, the passion predictions fulfill the criterion of plausibility.<sup>37</sup> His prediction comes as no surprise within Jesus' Jewish context, given the fact that he had made enemies of prominent Jewish leaders, considered himself a prophet and would naturally share the fate of a prophet, given the Jewish traditions describing martyrdom and vindication by God (2 Macc. 7), and that John the Baptist had been recently executed for similar activities.<sup>38</sup>

Combined, these six arguments strongly suggest that Jesus predicted his violent and imminent death and subsequent resurrection. This creates a catch-22 for Muslims. If Jesus actually predicted his violent and imminent death and God rescued him from such a death, he is a false prophet, since his predictions failed to come true. But this would contradict the *Qur'an*, which refers to Jesus as a true prophet (2:87, 136, 253; 3:45; 4:171; 5:75; 57:27; 61:6). The other option is that Jesus died a violent and imminent death as he had predicted. But this, too, would contradict the *Qur'an*, which asserts that he was rescued from death in the first century (4:157-58). Either way, the *Qur'an* is wrong.

There are only a few means of possible escape for Muslim apologists. One is simply to deny that Jesus predicted his violent and imminent death. But those choosing this route must answer the six reasons provided above that form a strong case for the historicity of the passion predictions. A Muslim might also reply that a true prophet need not be 100 percent accurate in everything he or she says or thinks. After all, the Old Testament portrays Abraham as deceiving two kings by claiming that his wife Sarah was his sister while only shortly afterward God refers to him as a prophet (Gen. 20:2, 7). The actual test involves a prophet claiming to speak for God on a matter and he turns out being mistaken. In this case, he is a false prophet (Deut. 18:20-22). Muslims might argue that if Jesus did not actually teach but only shared that he *believed* he would die an imminent and violent death without knowing

God would rescue him, we would not regard him as a false prophet. In other words, if Jesus said, “I think I am going to die a violent death in the near future,” that is entirely different than if he had said, “Thus says the Lord: I am going to die a violent death in the near future.”

While this is a fair objection, it still fails. In Mark 8:31-33 (cf. Matt. 16:21; Luke 9:22) and 9:31 (cf. Matt. 17:22-23), Jesus is reported to have *taught* his disciples that it was *necessary*, indeed, God’s will, that he die an imminent and violent death. Elsewhere, Jesus states as fact that he will be killed soon (Mark 10:33-34; cf. Matt. 20:18-19; Mark 14:22-27; cf. Matt. 26:21-32; Luke 22:15-22; see also Luke 13:32-33), even appealing to divine Scriptures in support (Mark 14:27; Matt 26:31). His passion predictions were far more than his merely believing that he would die an imminent and violent death. Jesus taught that it must occur because it was the will of God in fulfillment of the divine Scriptures. Accordingly, Muslims are still caught between the proverbial rock and a hard place with nowhere to go.

### *What about the Gospel of Barnabas?*

There are two extant manuscripts of GB.<sup>39</sup> The Italian is the oldest. Because it was introduced into Hofbibliothek in Vienna in 1738, it has a *terminus ad quem* of the early eighteenth century.<sup>40</sup> In addition to the Italian, there is a Spanish manuscript of GB that includes a note at the beginning with the claim that it was translated from Italian and a preface by Fra Marino asserting that, as a Catholic clergy, he had been given an unknown work against Paul by Irenaeus that “quoted extensively” from a *Gospel of Barnabas*.<sup>41</sup> Marino then claimed he had searched for GB and had discovered a copy of it in the office of Pope Sixtus V, which he stole while the Pope was sleeping.

The report of Fra Marino in the Spanish manuscript is shady. Not only has Irenaeus’s alleged work against Paul never been found or mentioned otherwise, his extant works are quite the opposite of being anti-Pauline in character. In *Against Heresies*, Irenaeus refers to “the two most glorious apostles, Peter and Paul” (AH 3.3.2) and claims that the teachings of Paul, Peter, John, and the rest of the apostles are all in harmony (AH 3.21.3). Indeed, Irenaeus mentions Paul’s teachings

many times and always employs them as though trustworthy. He only mentions Barnabas on seven occasions and *never* quotes from or even mentions a *Gospel of Barnabas* (AH 3.12.9, 14 [twice], 15 [twice]; 3.13.3; 3.14.1). Therefore, credulity reigns when Muslims accept the existence of an anti-Pauline work by Irenaeus, when such a work is based on a single medieval report, is otherwise never mentioned in ancient or medieval literature, has never been seen since, and clearly contradicts all of the works of Irenaeus that we have in our possession. One may wonder how a Muslim apologist unmoved by this observation would reply to a claim that a lost work of Bukhari had been discovered by a now deceased Imam who had showed it to no one but claimed that in it Bukhari frequently quoted a letter from Abu Bakr asserting that Muhammed had enlisted the services of a lettered relative who secretly composed the *Qur'an*.

The Gelasian Decree (AD 492-96) stated that GB had been falsely attributed to Barnabas. In the seventh century, the *List of Sixty Books* (Apocryphal Writings, #24) likewise mentions it along with the *Letter of Barnabas* (Apocryphal Writings, #18). Muslims rightly claim that this is proof that there was a GB in the fifth century that was not a Muslim forgery. While this is true of the GB mentioned by the Gelasian Decree and the *List of Sixty Books*, it is another matter of whether it is the same GB we have today. A number of data suggest it is not.

There are two prominent anachronisms in GB. In Leviticus 25:11, the year of Jubilee occurred every 50 years. Around AD 1300, Pope Boniface the Eighth decreed that the year of Jubilee would now be held at the turn of every century, which amounts to every 100 years. However, after Boniface died, Pope Clemens the Sixth returned the year of Jubilee to every 50 years in 1343. Therefore, it is of interest that GB 82 states that the year of Jubilee is every 100 years. This suggests that GB was probably written between AD 1300-1343. Another anachronism may be observed in GB 152 where wooden wine-casks are mentioned. These were common in medieval Europe and differed from the wineskins that were used in first century Palestine (Matt. 9:17).

GB appears to have been influenced by Dante's *Inferno*. GB 23 says of past prophets:

Readily and with gladness they went to their death, so as not to offend against the law of God given by Moses his servant, and go and serve false and lying gods.

The expression “false and lying gods” is found on three other occasions in GB (78; 128; 217). Although the phrase does not appear in the Bible or the *Qur'an*, it is found in Dante’s *Inferno* (1.72), an Italian book written in the early fourteenth century. It is noteworthy that the earliest known manuscript of GB is in Italian and the Spanish manuscript claims to be a translation of an Italian one.

Muslim apologists who are not dissuaded by multiple anachronisms and the appearance of influence from Dante’s *Inferno* should note that GB quite clearly contradicts the *Qur'an*. GB 105 and 178 assert there are nine heavens, whereas *Qur'an* 2:29 states that God made seven. GB 3 asserts that Mary experienced no pain when giving birth to Jesus, whereas *Qur'an* 19:23 states that Mary experienced great pain during the event. GB 42 and 82 assert that Jesus is not Messiah. However, there are nine texts in the *Qur'an* referring to Jesus as Messiah (3:45; 4:157, 171, 172; 5:17, 72, 75; 9:30; 9:31). Of further interest is that while GB denies that Jesus is Messiah, it refers to him as “Christ” on three occasions in the Opening paragraph and once in GB 6. This is odd, since the word “Christ” was the Greek translation for “Messiah.” This mistake is comical and one the real Barnabas of first century Palestine would not have made.<sup>42</sup>

Despite the fact that in GB it says that Jesus commands Peter, John, and others to be his witnesses throughout the world, that God had rescued Jesus, and that it was Judas who had been crucified (219-21), there is good evidence suggesting that Peter and John consistently preached the atoning death and resurrection of Jesus. Not only is this the report of Acts (2:22-36; 3:11-26; 4:10; 5:27-32; 10:38-43) and the canonical Gospels connected with Peter (Mark) and John, Paul reported that his own message was in agreement with theirs (1 Cor. 15:11; Gal. 2:1-9). Also of interest are the statements of two of the apostolic fathers who are believed to have been disciples of Peter and John. It is probable that Clement of Rome was a disciple of Peter, and Polycarp was a disciple of John.<sup>43</sup> If Clement and Polycarp regarded Paul as having veered from true doctrine, we would expect to find

them chiding him in their letters. Instead, Clement places Paul on par with his mentor Peter and refers to both as “the greatest and most righteous pillars” (1 Clem. 5). Polycarp asserts that Paul “accurately and firmly” taught the word of truth” (Pol. *Phil.* 3:2). He also quotes from Ephesians twice and refers to it as part of the “sacred Scriptures” (Pol. *Phil.* 12:1). Clement and Polycarp also mention the death and resurrection of Jesus which GB denies (1 Clem. 42:3; Pol. *Phil.* 1:2; 2:1–2; 9:2; 12:2). Accordingly, the assertions of GB are no match for the abundance of historical evidence that Peter and John were preaching the death and resurrection of Jesus and that Paul propagated the same message.

What was GB? In 1999, two Christian scholars whose primary language is Arabic rewrote the *Qur'an*, replacing Islamic doctrine with Christian. They called the new book *The True Furqan*.<sup>44</sup> Christian scholars were not the first to make this sort of move. In 1979, Muslim scholar Ahmad Shafaat rewrote the canonical Gospels with a Muslim rather than Christian message and called it *The Gospel According to Islam*.<sup>45</sup> Aside from outright forgery, this appears to be what the author of GB was doing in the fourteenth century.

In short, there are no good reasons for regarding GB as authentic work of the apostle Barnabas. It contains anachronisms that suggest it was written in the first half of the fourteenth century, contradicts the *Qur'an* in a number of places, makes a linguistic blunder the historical Barnabas certainly would not have made, contradicts the strong evidence that the faithful apostles were preaching the message found in the NT literature, and has a shady history. The Muslim appeal to GB is thus far more naïve than the Christian citing of Mark 16:9-20 in support of Jesus' resurrection.

### *The Sign of Jonah*

This leaves us with the Sign of Jonah. Analogies need not match in every point and rarely do. The Sign of Jonah certainly does not, since, unlike Jonah, Jesus was not placed out of commission as a result of disobedience to God. Moreover, a responsible hermeneutic interprets questionable texts in light of numerous clear ones. When

this is done, it is clear that Jesus' death is implied in the Sign of Jonah. Matthew, who reports the Sign of Jonah, has Jesus predicting his death at least on four other occasions (16:21; 17:23; 20:19; 26:61). Moreover, clear predictions of Jesus' death are reported five times by Mark (8:31; 9:31; 10:33-34; 12:7-8; 14:8), all of which are reported by Matthew and all but one are reported by Luke.<sup>46</sup> Muslim apologists would have everyone reject all of the numerous other passion predictions that are strongly evidenced in favor of a prediction that is only clearly reported in a single Gospel that is not the earliest, and that does not necessarily contradict the other predictions.

### *Conclusion*

Jesus' death and resurrection belong to the foundation of Christianity. Islam asserts that neither occurred. If Jesus did not die on a first century cross, Christianity is false and Islam has a chance of being correct. However, if Jesus rose from the dead, Christianity is true and Islam is false.

In spite of strong and abundant historical evidence for Jesus' first-century death by crucifixion, Islam offers three major arguments against it: the teachings of the *Qur'an*, GB, and a possible interpretation of the Sign of Jonah as it appears in Matthew's Gospel. However, all three arguments fail. This is devastating to Islam's claim to be the true religion of God, since if Jesus died by crucifixion, the *Qur'an* is mistaken. Because the mode of the divine inspiration of the *Qur'an* is one of dictation, if the *Qur'an* is mistaken it is not divinely inspired and the foundation of Islam crumbles.

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## Notes

1. *Gospel of Barnabas*, 215-16.
2. *Ibid.*, 217.
3. *Ibid.*, 218.
4. *Ibid.*, 219.
5. *Ibid.*, 220, cf. 112.
6. *Ibid.*, 221.
7. *Ibid.*, 222; cf. Opening.
8. While the majority of scholars grant that Josephus mentions Jesus' death in the *Testimonium*, there is wide disagreement regarding the extent to which the original text has been altered. Although no formal research has determined the percentage of Josephus scholars who accept parts of the passage versus those who reject it in its entirety, Feldman is perhaps the most qualified to make an informed guess. In Feldman (1984), he lists eighty-seven scholarly treatments on the *Testimonium* during that period. In a personal e-mail correspondence to me on Nov. 26, 2001, Feldman admitted that his list for the period of 1937 to 1980 is incomplete and that much more on the passage has appeared since 1980. Asked to make a rough guess of where contemporary scholarship stands on the authenticity of the *Testimonium*, he responded, "My guess is that the ratio of those who in some manner accept the *Testimonium* would be at least 3

- to 1. I would not be surprised if it would be as much as 5 to 1.” Jewish scholar Vermes (2000) agrees: “declaring the whole notice a forgery would amount to throwing out the baby with the bath water. Indeed, in recent years most of the experts, including myself, have adopted a middle course, accepting that part of the account is authentic” (227). Dunn (2003) refers to a “broad consensus” that holds that the authentic Josephus version was a modified version of our extant texts (141). See also Evans (1992), 364.
9. Tacitus does not specifically name crucifixion as the mode of Jesus’ execution but instead reports that Jesus suffered “the most extreme penalty” (*Annals* 15.44). Mara bar Serapion does not mention the mode of execution. Although of questionable historical value, the Talmud also reports the event but uses the term “hanged” (*b. Sanhedrin* 43a).
  10. Lucian, *The Passing of Peregrinus* 11.
  11. Mark 15:24-37; Matt. 27:35-50; Luke 23:33-46; John 19:16-37. Before the canonical Gospels were written, the death of Jesus is reported abundantly throughout the Pauline corpus and in all of Paul’s undisputed letters except Philemon (Rom. 1:4; 4:24; 5:6, 8; 10; 6:3, 4, 5, 8, 9, 10; 7:4; 8:11 [bis], 34; 10:9; 11:26; 14:9, 15; 1 Cor. 8:11; 15:3, 12, 13, 15, 16, 20; 2 Cor. 5:14, 15; Gal. 1:1; 2:21; Phil. 2:8; 3:10, 18; Col. 1:18, 20; 2:12, 14, 20; 1 Thess. 1:10; 4:14; 5:10; 2 Tim. 2:8, 11. Crucifixion of Christ [crucifixion, cross]: 1 Cor. 1:17, 18, 23; 2:2, 8; 2 Cor. 13:4; Gal. 2:20; 3:1; 6:12, 14; Eph. 1:20; 2:16). We find Jesus’ death also attested in Hebrews and 1 Peter (Heb. 2:9, 14; 9:15-10:14; 12:2; 13:20; 1 Pet. 1:3, 21; 2:24; 3:18). Both were certainly written in the first century and may pre-date the canonical Gospels (L. T. Johnson [1996], 151, 164).
  12. Ign. *Eph.* 16:2; Ign. *Trall.* 9:1; Ign. *Rom.* 7:2; *Barn.* 7:9; 12:1; *Mart. Pol.* 17:2. The *Gospel of Peter* (10, 18) and the *Epistle of the Apostles* (9) report Jesus’ death by crucifixion. The *Gospel According to the Hebrews* mentions Jesus’ death by implication of his bodily resurrection. The *Gospel of Mary* and the *Gospel of Truth* likewise mention Jesus’ death. Jesus’ crucifixion—without mentioning whether he died—is mentioned in the *Gospel of the Savior* (91-92, 100-108). Jesus is crucified and dies in the *Coptic Apocalypse of Peter* and *The Second Treatise of the Great Seth*, Gnostic writings dated to the third century. The *Gospel of Thomas* (65) and the *Gospel of Judas* (57) probably refer to the death of Jesus in *Thomas’s* version of Jesus’ parable of the vineyard and the wicked tenants and *Judas’s* mentioning of Jesus’ betrayal resulting in a sacrifice of Jesus’ body. The fate of Jesus is neither mentioned nor alluded to in Egerton Papyrus 2, *Gospel of the Nazareans*, *Gospel of the Ebionites*, and *Gospel of the Egyptians*.
  13. Miller (2008), 14.
  14. 1 Cor. 15:1-11.
  15. *Q* 14:27 and possibly *Q* 11:49-51 as indicated by the timing of “this generation” (Perkins [2007], 87; Smith [2003], 124).
  16. Allison (2005), 233-34; Barnett (1999), 181; Funk and the Jesus Seminar (1998), 454; Habermas (2003), 17; cf. Habermas (1996), 153; Koester (2000),

- 91; (1990), 6-7; Patterson (1994), 137, 138; Theissen and Merz (1998), 487; Wedderburn (1999), 113.
17. Barclay (1996), 16; Barnett (1994), 6; Burrigge and Gould (2004), 46; Dunn (2003), 855; Engelbrecht (1989), 244; Funk and the Jesus Seminar (1998), 466. Funk also stated that most of the Fellows of the Jesus Seminar believe the tradition predates Paul's conversion around AD 33 (454) (see also "Voting Records" [1994], 260, S6.); Grant (1977), 177; Hays (1997), 255; Koester (2000), 90; Lüdemann (2004), 31; Shanks and Witherington (2003), 109n3; Wedderburn (1999), 113. That it may be the oldest extant tradition, see Kendall (1988), 91; Lapide (2002, c. 1982), 98; Lindars (1986), 91; Patterson (1994), 136. See also Bauckham (2002), 259; Hurtado (*LJC*, 2003), 71; Lüdemann (2004), 138.
  18. Seven Brothers in 2 Macc. 7 (d. second century BC); Eleazar in 4 Macc. 6:1-30 (d. second century BC); Rabbi Akiba in Jerusalem Talmud, *Berakhot* 9, 7/8 [14b]; Babylonian Talmud, *Berakhot* 61b (d. second century AD); Rabbi Hanina ben Taradion in Babylonian Talmud, *Abodah Zerah* 18a (d. second century AD). See also the Christian accounts of Stephen in Acts 6:8-7:60 (d. first century AD) and Polycarp in *Mart. Pol.* 7:1-16:1 (d. second century AD).
  19. Feldman, "Introduction" in Feldman and Hata, eds. (1989), 42; Gundry (1993), 965-66; Keener (1999), 682; Vermes (2006), 122. Then Mark and Matthew report that Jesus cried out with a loud voice and died (Mark 15:37; Matthew 27:50). Matthew reports that Jesus cried out with a loud voice *again*, the former cry asking why he had been forsaken (27:46). Although Matthew does not report the content of his latter cry, we cannot know whether the cry was with or without specific words. It may also be noted that Jesus was defiant when brought before the Jewish leaders, implying that he will judge those who are now judging him (Mark 14:61-64; Matt. 26:63-66; Luke 22:66-69), which is similar to the defiance we observe with the Jewish martyrs. Reports by Luke and John are more like the Jewish martyrs with Luke reporting Jesus as saying, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit" (Luke 23:46) and John reporting his utterance, "It is finished" (John 19:30).
  20. Luke 23:34. Stephen does this as well (Acts 7:60).
  21. A possible candidate for encomium is John 18:4-6. We may also note with Johnson (1996) that "In none of the canonical Gospels is the scandal of the cross removed in favor of the divine glory" such as is seen in the Gnostic Gospels (150).
  22. McIntyre (2001), 8.
  23. Lüdemann (2004), 50. See also Borg (2006), 271-72; Crossan (1991), 375; cf. 372; Crossan (1994), 145; Miller (2008), 14.
  24. Vermes (2006), 9. Another Jewish scholar, Lapide (2002), claims that Jesus' death by crucifixion is "historically certain" (32).
  25. Fredriksen (1999), 8. Moderate to somewhat conservative scholars likewise grant Jesus' death by crucifixion as historical. See R. Brown (*Death*, 1994): "most scholars accept the uniform testimony of the Gospels that Jesus died during the Judean prefecture of Pontius Pilate" (1373); Charlesworth (2008):

- “Jesus died by Roman execution, decreed by the Roman prefect” (111); Ehrman (2000): “One of the most certain facts of history is that Jesus was crucified on orders of the Roman prefect of Judea, Pontius Pilate” (162; cf. [2008], 235, 261-62); Johnson (1996): “The support for the mode of his death, its agents, and perhaps its co-agents, is overwhelming: Jesus faced a trial before his death, was condemned, and was executed by crucifixion” (125); Sanders (1985) includes Jesus’ death by crucifixion outside Jerusalem by the Roman authorities in his list of “almost indisputable facts . . . which can be known beyond doubt” (11).
26. Dunn (2003), 801.
  27. Crossley (2005), 173; Habermas (2003), 92. According to McKnight (2005), there appears to be strong agreement that there are three primary passion predictions in the Synoptics. For a detailed comparison of these, see McKnight’s chart (227).
  28. Jesus’ resurrection is implied since without a resurrection we must ask what is the sign to which Jesus refers. Moreover, Matthew earlier portrayed Jesus saying that his resurrection is the sign of Jonah. Robinson, Hoffman, and Kloppenborg (2002) recognize the presence of these sayings in Q, although they exclude the “sign of Jonah” portion since it is absent in Luke: Q 11:16, 29-30 (109); Q 12:[54-56] (127).
  29. This does not apply to Jesus’ predictions related to his resurrection.
  30. Evans (1999), 88; Habermas (2003), 92; Vermes (2008), 82.
  31. Maier (1997): “If the story of Holy Week were a pious invention of writers who wanted to portray a superhero, this scene would never have been included” (131).
  32. In Mark 10:45 Jesus’ death will serve as a ransom for many. At the Last Supper Jesus claims that his body and blood will be sacrificed on behalf of many and a new covenant will be instituted (Mark 14:22-24; Matt. 26:26-28; Luke 22:19-20). In John 3:13-14, Jesus will be crucified so that others may have eternal life. In Luke 13:32-33, the “goal” of which Jesus speaks may be his death for others, given Luke 22:19-20.
  33. McKnight (2005), 230; Theissen and Merz (1998), 429. Evans (1999), 88, and McKnight (2005), 232, note that the passion predictions likewise do not mention the Parousia and the coming of the Son of Man for judgment.
  34. Habermas (2003), 92. Schaberg (1985) argues that Jesus’ passion predictions where he refers to himself as the Son of Man in the Synoptics and the three Johannine predictions (3:13-14; 8:28; 12:31-34) are allusions to the Son of Man in Daniel 7:13.
  35. Although many scholars grant that Jesus claimed to be the “Son of Man,” further division exists pertaining to what Jesus meant by the term. Bock (2000, ©1998): “The ‘Son of Man’ [in Mark 14:61-64] is an otherwise, unidentified representative head . . . who shares God’s authority, is a regal-like representative for the nation who is given judging authority and divine prerogative” (150; see 148-54); Dunn (2003) understands the term to mean “a man like me” in most of the occurrences while he grants “at least some reference to” the Son of Man in Daniel 7:13 (760);

Theissen and Merz (1998): “In our view the interpretation mentioned last is therefore the most probable one: Jesus spoke of both the present and the future Son of Man. He combined the expression ‘son of man’ from everyday language with the visionary-language tradition of a heavenly being ‘like a son of man’ . . . He is at the same time the present and the future ‘man’. This ‘double’ concept of Son of Man is analogous to the ‘double’ kingdom of God eschatology” (552). Hurtado (2003) denies that Jesus made claims to being the Son of Man. Instead, it was the first “bilingual circles of Jesus’ followers to serve as his distinctive self-referential expression in conveying his sayings in Greek” (304). According to Hurtado, the purpose of this expression was “to identify and distinguish a person” and “[refer] to him emphatically as human descendant” (305). We might use an American idiom for Hurtado’s bilingual group who were saying of Jesus, “You da man!”

36. Bock (2000, ©1998) notes that the title “Son of Man” is applied to Jesus 82 times in the Gospels, 81 of which come from the lips of Jesus (John 12:34, in which Jesus’ critics quote his words back to him and ask who was the “Son of Man,” is the lone exception). Taking parallels into consideration, there are 51 logia of which 14 appear in Mark and 10 in Q. There are four occurrences in the NT outside of the Gospels: Acts 7:56; Heb. 2:6; Rev. 1:13; 14:14. (Also see Dunn [2003], 737.) The term is rare in the writings of the early church (225). Bock goes on to demonstrate that even the *apocalyptic Son of Man* logia are multiply attested in Mark, Q, M, and L. (We may add John [5:27; 9:35-36; 12:23] and that these logia appear in multiple literary forms: parabolic, apocalyptic, didactic.) “If the criterion of multiple attestation means anything or has any useful purpose, then the idea that Jesus spoke of himself in these terms should not be doubted” (226). Theissen and Merz (1998): “It is certain that Jesus used the expression ‘son of man’. It derives from Aramaic and is attested in all the complexes of the Jesus tradition (Mark; Q; Matt, cf. 10.23; 25.31ff./ Luke, cf. e.g. 18.8; John; Gospel of Thomas 86)” (548); Dunn (2003): The Son of Man phrase “*was remembered as a speech usage distinctive of Jesus because that is precisely what it was*. It was Jesus who, if we may put it so, introduced ‘the son of man’ phrase into the Jesus tradition. The evidence could hardly point more plainly to that conclusion” (738, emphasis in original; cf. 759).
37. Please note that this observation only applies to Jesus’ prediction pertaining to his death. His predictions that he would resurrect shortly after his death do not fulfill this criterion.
38. R. Brown (1994), 2:1486; Crossan (1991), 352; Crossley (2005), 173; Dunn (2003), 797, 805; Evans (1999), 94; McKnight (2005), 231; Theissen and Merz (1998), 429; Turner (2000), 16-17. McKnight (2005) asserts, “The logic is simple and unavoidable: if Jesus called his disciples to a willing martyrdom, for which there is plenty of evidence (Q 12:4-9; 14:27; 17:33), we can infer with the utmost probability that he, too, saw his own death approaching” (155). Evans (1999), however, cautions: “The rhetoric of such a summons may have been

- intended to underscore the dangers and difficulties that lay ahead; not necessarily the certainty of Jesus' death, or of the death of any of his followers" (89).
39. Lonsdale and Laura Ragg also mention a Greek fragment of GB (xvi). My English translation is as follows: "Barnabas the apostle said [that] in evil contests [or conflicts] the victor is the more morally wretched because he leaves having greater sin." Nothing even close to this statement appears in GB.
  40. *Ibid.*, xvi.
  41. *Ibid.*, xv.
  42. The early Church loved Barnabas. Some of the churches regarded the *Letter of Barnabas* to be canonical and many of those that did not still valued it highly. There is not enough data to render a conclusion pertaining to whether the letter and Gospel attributed to Barnabas and known by the *List of Sixty Books* were written by the same author. However, it is clear that the GB in our possession today and the *Letter of Barnabas* were not composed by the same person. In agreement with Genesis, the *Letter of Barnabas* presents Isaac, rather than Ishmael, as the preferred son (6:8; 7:3; 8:4; 13:3ff.). Whereas GB denies that Jesus is the Son of God, the *Letter of Barnabas* refers to Jesus as the "Son of God"—and more. In *Letter of Barnabas*, Jesus is referred to as the "Son of God" (5:9, 11; 7:2, 9 [in 7:9, Jesus himself claimed he was the Son of God]; 12:1-11), "Christ" (12:10-11), "Lord Jesus Christ" (1:1; 2:6), and "Lord" (5:5 [Lord of the whole world]; 7:2; 12:10-11). Jesus participated with God in creating humans according to the image that both he and God shared (5:5; cf. 6:12). Jesus suffered for us/our sins, was crucified, and died (5:1-2 [in fulfillment of Scripture], 5-6, 12-14 [in fulfillment of Scripture]; 6:7; 7:2-3, 9; 12:1-10 [as was predicted]; 14:4-5). Jesus was resurrected (5:6; 15:9). These teachings in the *Letter of Barnabas* are in stark contradiction to the teachings in GB, indicating that they do not share a common author. The teachings in the former are far more in line with what we find in the NT literature. Muslims must answer why GB should be regarded as authentic while rejecting the authenticity of the *Letter of Barnabas*.
  43. See Habermas and Licona (2004), 53-55.
  44. *The True Furqan* (Duncanville, TX: World Wide Publishing, 1999).
  45. Shafaat (1979).
  46. To go a little further with possible Muslim replies, see Licona (2006), 65-66.