

# The Crucifixion of Jesus

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## The Crucifixion According to the Quran

Quran 4:155-158, “[The Jews were condemned for breaking their covenant, rejecting Allah’s signs, killing the prophets unjustly]...and for boasting, ‘We killed the Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary, the messenger of Allah.’ But they neither killed nor crucified him—it was only made to appear so. Even those who argue for this crucifixion are in doubt. They have no knowledge whatsoever—only making assumptions. They certainly did not kill him. Rather, Allah raised him up to Himself. And Allah is Almighty, All-Wise.” (quran.com)

So, according to the Quran, Jesus wasn’t crucified or killed, but it was made to appear as if he was. Rather, Allah raised Jesus up to himself.

## Outline

- Multiple ancient sources
  - Ancient Non-Christian Sources
  - Ancient Christian Sources
- 4 More Criteria for Historical Reliability
  - Eyewitness Attestation
  - Early Attestation
  - Enemy Attestation
  - Embarrassing Attestation
- Coherent historical context: Jesus’ crucifixion fits the historical context of first-century Jerusalem, under the rule of the Roman Empire
- Archaeological evidence shows that crucifixion was practiced as described in the Gospel accounts
- Scholarly consensus: Virtually all modern scholars agree that Jesus was killed by crucifixion under Pontius Pilate during the reign of Tiberius. This includes Christian, non-Christian, religious, secular, and skeptical scholars.
- Muslim Explanations and Their Shortcomings: We will see that the explanations offered by Muslims for what occurred are simply untenable.

## I. Multiple Ancient Sources

Multiple attestation: Claims that have been recorded by multiple sources are generally more reliable than claims recorded by only one source.

Any extant source from 2000 years ago is remarkable because:

- a. Papyrus disintegrates easily, and
- b. Persecution of Christians resulted in the burning of countless manuscripts

Nonetheless, the death of Jesus of Nazareth by crucifixion is perhaps the best-attested fact in all of ancient history. The written testimony of what happened to Jesus is virtually unanimous among ancient historians.

### **Ancient Non-Christian Sources**

Josephus (37-100 AD), a Jewish historian writing ~94 A.D., wrote,

“When Pilate, upon hearing him accused by men of the highest standing amongst us, had condemned him to be crucified, those who had first come to love him did not cease.” (Source: [Testimonium Flavianum in Josephus' work \*Antiquities of the Jews\*, Book 18, Chapter 3, Section 3](#))

Mara-bar Serapion (1<sup>st</sup> century)

He was a Jewish Stoic philosopher from Syria in the first century, who wrote to his son from prison, “Or [what advantage came to] the Jews by the murder of their Wise King, seeing that from that very time their kingdom was driven away from them?” (Source: [BL Add. 14658, British Museum, London, England](#)).

Cornelius Tacitus (c. 56-120), a Roman orator and public official wrote, “Nero fastened the guilt [of the burning of Rome] 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 Pilate.” (Source: [Tacitus, \*Annals\* 15.44, in \*The Annals: The Reigns of Tiberius, Claudius, and Nero\*, translated by J. C. Yardley, introduction and notes by Anthony A. Barrett \(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008\), 326.](#))

Lucian of Samosata (c. 125-after 180), a Greek satirist, wrote around 165 A.D., “The Christians, you know, worship a man to this day—the distinguished personage who introduced their novel rites, and was crucified on that account.” (Source: [Lucian of Samosata, \*The Passing of Peregrinus\*, in \*Lucian, Selected Works\*, trans. A. M. Harmon \(Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1913; for online source, see also \*Lucian of Samosata, The Passing of Peregrinus\*, trans. Peter Kirby, in \*Early Christian Writings\*, accessed August 14, 2025, <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/lucian.html>.\)](#))

This quote affirms that Jesus was worshiped very early on, disputing the idea that Jesus as the God-man was a legend that developed over time.

## Jewish Talmud

The Jewish Talmud, depending on earlier sources, also reports that “on the eve of the Passover Yeshu was hanged.” Crucifixion was described in antiquity as being hung on a tree, and Yeshu refers to Jesus. Yeshu is Joshua in Hebrew, and the Greek equivalent is Iesous or Jesus. (Source: [Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 43a, translation and commentary in Harry Freedman, \*The Talmud: Oral Law and Oral Tradition\* \(New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1965\)](#))

## **Ancient Christian Sources**

### What about bias?

- Everyone is biased.
- The Bible is not a single source. It’s a collection of 66 books written by about 40 different authors, over a time period of about 1500 years.
- Even so, they cohere into one consistent, unified overarching story and worldview. That seems providential, if not miraculous.
- The New Testament alone is a collection of 27 books by about 9 different authors. They were included in the Bible because they were written very early, by reliable sources, and trusted by the early Christians.
- There were no Christians before Christ. The authors of the Gospels and the epistles were persuaded by the evidence—the evidence they saw and heard from eyewitnesses of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection.

## **First-Generation Christian Sources**

We have five independent, first-generation Christian sources affirming Jesus’ death. These include Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, and Paul.

## **Second-Generation Christian Sources**

We also have second-generation Christian sources, including Papias, Polycarp, Clement, and Ignatius.

## **Contrast with Islam:**

The Qur’an is supposedly the revelations of Allah given to Muhammad through the Angel Gabriel and written down by Muhammad’s followers. So, there is one source, the Qur’an, based on the testimony of one man, Muhammad, about an event that he didn’t even witness.

## **II. Criteria for Historical Reliability – The Four Es**

### Eyewitness Attestation

- The Gospel accounts were based on eyewitness testimony
  - Matthew was a disciple of Jesus (eyewitness to events he records)
  - Mark was based on the eyewitness testimony of Peter
  - Luke was based on the eyewitness testimony of several whom he interviewed and of Paul, with whom he traveled

- John was one of Jesus inner circle of three disciples who saw everything
- Those who witnessed the crucifixion include:
  - Mary, the mother of Jesus (John 19:25)
  - Mary Magdalene (Matt. 27:56; Mark 15:40; John 19:25)
  - Mary, wife of Clopas (John 19:25)
  - Salome, mother of John and James Zebedee (Mark 15:40)
  - Other women from Galilee (Luke 23:49; Luke 23:47)
  - John, disciple of Jesus (John 19:26-27)
  - Roman soldiers (All four Gospels)
  - The centurion (Matt. 27:54; Mark 15:39; Luke 23:47)
  - Chief priests, scribes, elders (Matthew, Mark, Luke)
  - The crowd (All four Gospels)
- Paul points people to the living eyewitnesses in 1 Corinthians 15:6: “After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep.”

### Early Attestation

- 1 Corinthians 15 contains an early creed that dates to within a few years of the crucifixion “For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: *that Christ died for our sins* in accordance with the Scriptures, <sup>4</sup> that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, <sup>5</sup> and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. <sup>6</sup> Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. <sup>7</sup> Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. <sup>8</sup> Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.” (1 Cor. 15:3-8, emphasis mine)

- The early nature of this creed is granted by virtually every non-Christian scholar. Why?

1. Paul’s introductory comment, “I delivered to you...what I also received,” denotes the imparting of oral tradition
2. Verses 3-5 appear to be Aramaic in origin, which is the original language of the disciples and suggests a very early construction
3. The text’s content is stylized and contains parallelism as in a creed
4. The non-Pauline language indicates Paul didn’t write it

### Enemy Attestation

Jesus’ enemies didn’t deny his death; they implicitly affirmed he had died by claiming his body was missing because the disciples stole it.

### Embarrassing Attestation

- Women were the first witnesses to the empty tomb and the resurrected Jesus

- Jesus' male disciples were hiding behind locked doors out of fear of the Jewish leaders (John 20:19).
- Crucifixion was a shameful and scandalous means of death reserved for the worst criminals, outcasts, and scum of society. F
- First-century Jews were likely to make up a story of a conquering king.

### Contrast with Islam

- Not a single eyewitness to the claim made in the Qur'an.
- Muhammad lived 600 years after the events
- When Muhammad was asked to do miracles to confirm his truthfulness, he couldn't do any. His own followers doubted his reliability
- The could offer was the inimitability of the Qur'an

### III. Coherent Historical Context

- The Roman governor of Syria, Publius Quintilius Varus, crucified 2000 Jews in 4 B.C. in response to a revolt in Judea following the death of Herod the Great ([Source: Josephus's "Jewish Antiquities" \(Book 17, sections 289–295\)](#))
- Jesus was presented as a potential political threat in a highly volatile Judean province under Roman occupation.
- The Gospels' depiction of Jesus being executed by Pontius Pilate during Passover fits well within what historians know about tensions between Jews and Romans in first-century Judea.

### IV. Archeological Context

- Yehohanan's Pierced Heel Bone (discovered in 1968)

([Source: https://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/biblical-topics/crucifixion/a-tomb-in-jerusalem-reveals-the-history-of-crucifixion-and-roman-crucifixion-methods/](https://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/biblical-topics/crucifixion/a-tomb-in-jerusalem-reveals-the-history-of-crucifixion-and-roman-crucifixion-methods/))

- Venice Skeleton Pierced Heel Bone (discovered in 2007)

([Source: https://www.ancient-origins.net/news-history-archaeology/skeleton-evidence-crucifixion-discovered-0010173](https://www.ancient-origins.net/news-history-archaeology/skeleton-evidence-crucifixion-discovered-0010173))

### First-Century Jerusalem Tombs

- The Gospel descriptions of the tomb in which Jesus was laid align with what we know of tombs in the first century.
- Tombs had a unique style from 37 B.C. and 70 A.D.
- The biblical accounts of Jesus' burial in a tomb correspond closely with what historians expect from this unique historical period (see Matt. 27:60-61)

## V. Scholarly Consensus

- John Dominic Crossan (skeptic) of the Jesus Seminar wrote, "Jesus' death by crucifixion under Pontius Pilate is as sure as anything historical can ever be. For if no follower of Jesus had written anything for one hundred years after his crucifixion, we would still know about him from two authors not among his supporters. Their names are Flavius Josephus and Cornelius Tacitus." (Source: [John-Dominic Crossan, \*Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography\* \(Harper One, 1995\), 145.](#))
- Bart Ehrman (atheistic NT scholar): "One of the most certain facts of history is that Jesus was crucified on orders of the Roman prefect of Judea, Pontius Pilate." (Source: [Bart D. Ehrman, \*The Historical Jesus: Lecture Transcript and Course Guidebook, Part 2 of 2\* \(Chantilly, VA: The Teaching Company, 2000\), 162.](#))
- Gerd Ludemann (atheist NT professor at Gottingen): "Jesus' death as a consequence of crucifixion is indisputable." (Source: [Gerd Lüdemann, \*The Resurrection of Jesus: History, Experience, Theology\* \(Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994\), p. 50.](#))
- Paula Frederiksen: "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 Roman insurrectionists, namely, crucifixion." (Source: [Paula Fredriksen, \*Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews\* \(New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999\), 7-8.](#))

## VI. Muslim Explanations and their Shortcomings

- The Substitution Theory: Jesus was never hung on the cross. Rather, it was someone else whom Allah made to look like Jesus.
- Problems:
  - There is no evidence that the person crucified was anyone other than Jesus of Nazareth.
  - Eyewitnesses included Jesus' mother and disciple John.
  - 600 years later a caravan trader and warlord from modern-day Saudi Arabia called the facts into question.
  - This theory makes Allah the greatest liar and deceiver of all time.
  - This theory makes Jesus into an awful Messiah who either conspired with God to deceive his followers or failed to prepare his disciples for what Allah was about to do.
  - The disciples were willing to die for their belief that Jesus was crucified and then rose from the dead.
  - Jesus repeatedly told his disciples that he would be killed.
  - According to Islam, Allah did all of that just to send down the Quran 600 years later in order to correct the misunderstanding he had created.
- The Swoon Theory: Jesus was nailed to the cross, but lost consciousness and was buried alive. Three days later, he was seen having regained consciousness, and people mistakenly attributed these events to a miraculous resurrection from the dead.

- Problems:
  - There is no evidence for this theory; people claimed the body was stolen, but no one claimed he didn't die.
  - The Romans were experts at crucifixion.
  - If Jesus had passed out, he would have died by asphyxiation within minutes
  - The guards stabbed Jesus in the heart to be sure he was dead
  - The certainty of death given the historical accounts was affirmed by modern doctors (Source: William D. Edwards, Wesley J. Gabel, and Floyd E. Hosmer, "On the Physical Death of Jesus Christ," *Journal of the American Medical Association* 255, no. 11 (March 21, 1986): 1455-1463.)
  - Jesus' body was embalmed in 75 pounds of spices, and he was placed in a cold tomb blocked by a massive stone too heavy for even a strong, healthy man to move.
  - If Jesus had laid in the tomb, bloodied and on the verge of death for three days, he would not have been confused with a resurrected man, but rather someone in need of desperate medical care.