

WHY I AM NOT A MUSLIM Pt 3

There is a lot to be said about common sense. It's not perfect, but more times than not, it is spot on. That is one of the marvels I have seen happen over and over in jury trials. Jurors bring common sense to issues and analysis and reach proper conclusions using that common sense.

Last week provided a good example. I was in week ten of a trial about whether my clients were injured by a defective type of hip implant. The defense in my trial offered a witness to testify to the company's position on the history and development of their product, why it was reasonably and carefully done, and why the product was reliable. Now the jurors are not well versed in the history of modern hip replacements, but the jurors do have common sense.

When it came my time to cross-examine the witness, I thought one of the most important things to do was to let the jury know the witness's bias. This is a witness that was so attached to the industry she was defending that it had blinded her vision of reality, and certainly clouded her judgment as she passed it on to the jury. While the witness pretended to be an independent academic (a "professor" at a major university), in truth, she had never taught a class, was funded 100% by the very company she was testifying for, and had agreed she would not publish anything without advance written consent from that company. She was hardly independent.

The jury, armed with an accurate presentation of her ties to the company for which she testified, was able to use common sense to filter her opinions. Where she testified to objective facts, like what was the measurement of one part or another, that testimony was fairly reliable. But where she was testifying contrary to normal scientific opinion, in a way that inured to the benefit of her benefactors, it was right for the jury to be on guard, and view that testimony with appropriate skepticism.

Common sense helps us evaluate veracity day in and day out in our lives. So, while it is not infallible, I am always hesitant to throw it out the window when determining what I believe. So it is with the Muslim faith. This faith is fully dependent on the Qur'an being 100 percent without flaw, not only in what it originally said as given to Muhammad from Allah, but in the way Allah has secured it through the centuries – never fluctuating, always precisely correct. If there is an error in the Qur'an, the Muslim faith self-implodes. It would reveal itself false.

In this way, I chose, out of the many claims in the Qur'an, a very central one for my examination – whether or not Jesus died on a cross. The Qur'an says he didn't. History, even without the Bible, says he did.

As I finish my analysis on this, let me bring to the front the passage from the Qur'an, along with the interpretations. The Qur'an teaches that Jesus was not crucified. In 4:157 we read,

And for their saying, "We have killed the Messiah, Jesus, the son of Mary, the Messenger of God." In fact, they did not kill him, nor did they crucify him, but it appeared to them as if they did. Indeed, those who differ about him are in doubt about it. They have no knowledge of it, except the following of assumptions. Certainly, they did not kill him.

There are various Muslim approaches to what happened to Jesus in relation to the cross. The primary view is that God somehow switched out another and disguised that person as Jesus so that Jesus was spared from even being crucified. Typically, this "other" is seen to be Simon the Cyrene. I examined this carefully in light of historical sources, Jewish, Roman, Greek, and Biblical in the last installment of this lesson. This week we concentrate on the second Muslim explanation for this passage.

A second view often discussed is that Jesus was in fact crucified, but to the death. By this interpretation, Jesus was still alive when he was taken down from the cross.

Jesus did not die on the cross, nor was he killed as were the two thieves, but to the Jews he appeared as if he were dead.¹

This Muslim teaching, recorded nearly 600 years after the events defies common sense. First, it must still be weighed against the accounts of pagan, Jewish, and Christian historians who wrote hundreds of years earlier. Those accounts were given previously. Beyond that, however, it demands a careful examination of what Jesus allegedly "lived through."

We first need to lay out the basic event that happened. We can then do historical research on those events, and finally apply common sense to conclude what happened. A part of this analysis should also include any insights into why and how Muhammad got it so wrong in the Qur'an.

THE EVENTS

The gospels record Jesus' arrest and the subsequent events. Jesus was taken to the High Priest. There he was taunted, hit, slapped around, spit upon, and then bound for delivery to Pilate, the Roman governor (Mt. 26:57-68; Mk. 14:53-65; Lk. 22:63-71; Jn. 18:19-24). Once in the custody of Pilate, the abuse continued. Jesus was again beaten and crowned with a mocking crown of thorns (Mt. 27:27-31; Mk. 15:16-20). John adds that Jesus was

¹ Ali, at 431 (elec. ed.).

“flogged,” a typical Roman punishment, in hopes that would satisfy the blood-thirsty crowd. It didn’t, and Jesus was led away to be crucified (Jn. 19:1-16).

The crucifixion happened outside of the city on a hill called “Golgotha.” Two thieves were executed at the same time. In an effort to hasten the deaths, soldiers broke the legs of the two others crucified with Jesus (with broken legs, one cannot force oneself up to breathe, and death quickly ensues). But with Jesus, they found him already dead and didn’t break his legs. This feature fuels the Muslim conspiracy theory that Jesus wasn’t really dead from the crucifixion, and was able to walk away from the tomb days later. The events are not so simple, however, because in an effort to make sure Jesus was dead, one soldier thrust his spear into Jesus’ side, puncturing the heart sack, resulting in a release of blood and water (Jn. 19:17-37).

The gospels all place Jesus in a tomb with a stone and guard covering its face. Then, three days later, the tomb was found open and the body of Jesus was no longer inside. One of two things had happened; either the resurrection had occurred, or the biggest sham in history.

These events are not without historical information that helps us understand what happened.

The scourging that took place was a particularly brutal Roman punishment that itself frequently resulted in death. Scourging were inflicted by Roman “*lictors*,” people specially trained for the task. They used a tool called a “*flagellum*.” This was a short whip typically made of leather ropes connected to a wooden handle. The purpose of the scourging was not simply to inflict pain, like we might think of a “whipping” today. The point was to tear the flesh off the body. Therefore, the leather ropes had pieces of metal, bone, and even hooks attached. This resulted in deep lacerations, flesh torn off, muscles ripped apart, along with massive bleeding and more. The ancient historian Eusebius (c.260-c.339) wrote of accounts from scourging,

For they say that the bystanders were struck with amazement when they saw them lacerated with scourges even to the innermost veins and arteries, so that the hidden inward parts of the body, both their bowels and their members, were exposed to view.²

It was after receiving this punishment, that Jesus was made to carry the cross (likely just the 75-100-pound cross beam, the vertical beams seem to have been reused and would have already been on site.) Jesus buckled under the weight of the wood, and another was pulled from the crowd to carry it the rest of the way. Some Muslims believe that this was a magician’s trick of sorts, and the man pulled from the crowd (Simon of Cyrene) was

² Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 4:15:4.

mistakenly crucified in the place of Jesus. This again defies common sense that the Romans would not have been able to tell the difference between one who had been stripped, beaten to a hair's breadth of death, physically unable to carry a cross, and another who was fresh, apparently selected as well-built for the task at hand. Immediately after this, the crucifixion took place.

Crucifixion had its roots in the centuries-old practice of impaling an enemy or criminal on a pole or stake. By the time of the Romans, crucifixion had been around several centuries, and the practice had become almost an art. There were a variety of ways to crucify people, but it was used exclusively as a capital punishment. People were crucified to death. There is no written record of anyone surviving a Roman crucifixion.

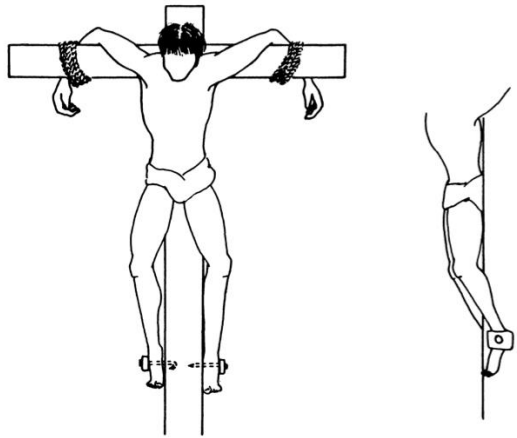
While ancient writings tell us a good deal about the usage of crucifixion, we have no fully detailed writings about how the process was done. For a time, those who wanted to dispute the Biblical record wrote sophisticated denials of the Biblical account that Jesus was crucified with nails, at least for the feet.³ Of course, common sense dictates that how a crucifixion occurred likely differed day-to-day as well as place-to-place. Some arms might be tied; some might be nailed. Some feet might be nailed one on top of the other, some side-to-side, some not at all. Some were crucified upside down, while others were right side up.

The denials of many that Jesus was nailed to the cross changed in 1968. In a Jerusalem suburb, the bones of a crucified individual were discovered in a burial box (an "ossuary") with the nail still penetrating one of the feet bones. The crucifixion of this man is easily datable to the first century, the era of Jesus' crucifixion. This discovery confirmed the hundreds of writings we have of people suffering a crucifixion punishment being "nailed" to the tree or cross.⁴ Based on a reconstruction of the bones and nail discovery in *Giv'at ha-Mivtar*, Joseph Zias and Eliezer Sekeles give a drawing of how that man was likely crucified.⁵ (Zias and Sekeles believe the man's arms were tied, whereas the excavator of the bones believed the arms were also nailed.)

³ See, e.g., Winter, Paul, *On the Trial of Jesus* (Walter De Gruyter 1961), who wrote that nails were never used on the feet of the crucified.

⁴ For a full review of this, see the excellent article, by John C. Robinson, "Crucifixion in the Roman World: The Use of Nails at the Time of Christ," *Studia Antiqua*, Vol. 2 No. 1 (Winter 2002), at 25.

⁵ Zias, Joseph and Sekeles, Eliezer, "The Crucified Man from Giv'at ha-Mivtar: A Reappraisal," *Israel Exploration Journal*, Vol. 35, No. 1 (1985), pp. 22-27.



Medical write-ups explain the multiple ways one could die from crucifixion, as well as the medical explanations that are most plausible in the case of Jesus.⁶ What is apparent from reading medical accounts, and more importantly, nearly 300 historical accounts of crucifixion in antiquity, is that regardless of which account we read, there is not *one* where the crucified survived. If Jesus was not killed in the process, he would be the only one known in history to have survived this ordeal. To me, this defies common sense, especially if I can find another likely source for Muhammad's account, beyond simply a recitation from Allah.

POSSIBLE SOURCES FOR MUHAMMAD'S ACCOUNT

Muhammad did not write the Qur'an. We are told it was given to him verbally in Arabic, but Muhammad recited it to others who wrote it down under Allah's watchful eye, never making a mistake. We are not, however, without other historical sources that might explain where Muhammad got his ideas or information used in his recitations.

In Surah 5:110 of the Qur'an we read,

Then will Allah say: "O Jesus the son of Mary! Recount My favor to thee and to thy mother. Behold! I strengthened thee with the holy spirit, so that thou didst speak to the people in childhood and in maturity. Behold! I taught thee the Book and Wisdom, the Law and the Gospel and behold! thou makest out of clay, as it were, the figure of a bird, by My leave, and thou breathest into it and it becometh a bird by My leave, and thou healest those born blind, and the lepers, by My leave.

⁶ William D. Edwards, MD; Wesley J. Gabel, MDiv; Floyd E. Hosmer, MS, AMI, "On the Physical Death of Jesus Christ," *Journal of the American Medical Association*, (1986) at 1455-1463.

We read in the gospels of Jesus healing the blind and the lepers, but we do not have the account of Jesus making a bird from clay. This idea surfaced well over a hundred years after Jesus, when people were clamoring for more stories about Jesus, especially during his infancy and childhood, where little was recorded by the gospel writers. During this time, a fictional piece surfaced called *The Infancy Gospel of Thomas*. It is a pseudepigraphal work, not really composed by Thomas (who would have died a long time earlier).

Chapter two of *The Infancy Gospel of Thomas* records,

This little child Jesus when he was five years old was playing at the ford of a brook... And having made soft clay, he fashioned thereof twelve sparrows. And it was the Sabbath when he did these things (or made them)... And a certain Jew when he saw what Jesus did, playing upon the Sabbath day, departed straightway and told his father Joseph: Lo, thy child is at the brook, and he hath taken clay and fashioned twelve little birds, and hath polluted the Sabbath day. And Joseph came to the place and saw: and cried out to him, saying: Wherefore doest thou these things on the Sabbath, which it is not lawful to do? But Jesus clapped his hands together and cried out to the sparrows and said to them: Go! and the sparrows took their flight and went away chirping. And when the Jews saw it they were amazed, and departed and told their chief men that which they had seen Jesus do.

Of course, merely having this story of the Qur'an also found in fictional writings of the second century does not mean that there is no truth to the story. Perhaps the fictional writing was based on real events. That is not my concern or point.

What I am concerned about is the fictional writing does show that Muhammad need not be deemed a charlatan, phony, or mad man for his recitations of the Qur'an to contain such accounts. These are accounts that he readily could have heard of just from his caravan life. (It is notable that Muhammad did not read or write, so would not have been able to read the Biblical gospels used and written in the first century.)

Historical biographies recount that Muhammad had among his wives one who was a Christian, he held a Christian slave, had a Christian cousin, and he lived and traded in a land where Christians were present. It is not surprising that he would be aware of Biblical stories as well as the fables that were present at the time.

A second fable that made it into the Qur'an concerned Jesus speaking as an infant brought forth by his mother Mary. In the 19th surah, verses 29-33 we read,

But she [Mary] pointed to the babe [the infant Jesus in his cradle]. They said: "How can we talk to one who is a child in the cradle?" He [the infant Jesus] said: "I am indeed a servant of Allah. He hath given me revelation and made

me a prophet; And He hath made me blessed wheresoever I be, and hath enjoined on me Prayer and Charity as long as I live; (He) hath made me kind to my mother, and not overbearing or miserable; So peace is on me the day I was born, the day that I die, and the day that I shall be raised up to life (again)"!

The idea of Jesus speaking to his mother as an infant is not found in the Biblical gospels, but that again doesn't mean that Muhammad would not have been exposed to the fable or idea. There was an Arabic infancy gospel of Jesus that was written in the era shortly before Muhammad. In that infancy gospel, we read of Jesus speaking to his mother as an infant.

He has said that Jesus spoke, and, indeed, when He was lying in His cradle said to Mary His mother: I am Jesus, the Son of God, the Logos, whom thou hast brought forth, as the Angel Gabriel announced to thee; and my Father has sent me for the salvation of the world.⁷

Again, does this prove that Muhammad was wrong? No. Does it show he clearly had other source material available that might have served as his influence for the Qur'an? Definitely.

In the same way, we are able to find late non-Biblical writings about Jesus that deny his true crucifixion. These are writings that flow from a gnostic heresy of Christianity, something that is readily documented and reasonably dated. These gnostic writings were driven by doctrine rather than early firsthand knowledge of Jesus (as were the Biblical gospels).

WHY WOULD JESUS DIE?

There is a stark contrast that underlies the historical issue of the crucifixion of Jesus. For the Muslim, Jesus would not have died thusly because he was God's prophet. No such degrading death would ensue for one who lived the anointed life of Jesus' calling. For the Christian, however, the death of Christ is the key seminal event that gives meaning to faith.

One of the earliest Christian teachers was the rabbi Paul. Paul wrote of the significance of Christ's death in a letter to the church in Philippi, composed about 25 to 30 years after the crucifixion. Paul was concerned that the Philippians not miss the significance of what Jesus did. The Muslims believe that no one of Jesus' honor as a prophet would be subject to such a humiliation, yet that is the very thing that Paul said makes the death of Jesus so spectacular and inspirational.

Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own

⁷ Elliott, J.K., *The Apocryphal New Testament*, (Oxford 1993).

interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Phil. 2:3-10).

This is the awesomeness of God explained in the Christian faith. God was willing to be humble before calling humanity to humility. God was willing to model sacrifice, before calling his people to be sacrificial. God was doing all this for a reason.

Even beyond this, the sacrifice of Jesus is the solution to the problem of everyone: How does a sinful person dwell in the presence of a perfect God? For the Muslim, it is by good deeds that outweigh the bad, either by number or quality. For the Christian, it is because the sins rightly demand death, and therefore, no one can be right before God or dwell in his presence unless the just demands are met. If I die for my own sins, then justice is met, and I am dead, separated from God by those sins. But if Jesus, one who is divinely perfect, dies for my sins, then I have peace with God, not because I am good enough, but because of God's love extended through real historical acts of Jesus.

I can't be a Muslim. I can't abdicate common sense on historical issues, of which the crucifixion of Jesus is a central example. I see how the Muslim accounts could have been generated outside of divine intervention, and the Muslim faith does not account for God's perfect greatness, in that the Muslims think God can ignore sins without paying the extreme price for them. That doesn't make sense to me.

POINTS FOR HOME

1. *“Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree’” (Gal. 3:13).*

This is a provocative statement, no doubt about it. It contains the *reason* for the crucifixion of Jesus. Jesus was afflicted on our behalf. The Muslim concept of God cannot conceive of God being punished or hurt, yet the Christian faith teaches otherwise. God chose to redeem humanity, and that came at a great cost. It cost God, not us. God does not simply have a moral eraser that allows him to erase sin on a whim. Sin is a course of action that brings about death. That is reality. God as a real God worked in that reality to satisfy both justice and exhibit his mercy. The cross is what it took to do both.

I should not let my life exhibit anything less than great thanks and appreciation to our God who loved me more than I can understand.

2. *“For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God”* (1 Cor. 1:17-18).

This is the root of the Christian faith. It is the power of the Christian faith. May it be so then for me. May I stand firm on the truth of Jesus being dead on the cross, saving me. May that power allow me to face whatever storms come, knowing I am in service to one who has faced worse, and secured my eternity in the process.

3. *“If we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.”* (Rom. 6:5).

As Christians, we believe that Jesus not only died, but was resurrected in an awesome display of God’s power. Not only God’s power over death, but God’s power over sin as well. God conquered the grave and the sin that sends us there. This is the power that is at work in me. There is nothing that God wants to do in my life, that he is unable to do, if only I give my life to him.