

Brill Reference

Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān

Crucifixion

Article Table of Contents

Nailing or binding the hands and [feet](#) of a criminal to a cross of execution. The verb *ṣalaba*, “to crucify,” occurs six times in the Qur'ān: twice in the root form and four times in the second verbal form. It is probably a Syriac loan word (see [foreign vocabulary](#)).

Etymology and meaning

The verb “to crucify” (*ṣalaba*), which occurs in the active voice at q 4:157 and in the passive at q 12:41, is a denominal verb from the noun *ṣalīb*, meaning a cross. This noun does not occur in the Qur'ān, although found in early poetry (see [poetry and poets](#)). It is probably derived from *ṣ^elībā*, the word for cross in Syriac. The precise meaning of the second form of the verb (*ṣallaba*), which occurs at q 5:33 in the passive voice and at q 7:124, 20:71 and 26:49 in the active, is uncertain. J. Penrice assumes that it is causative (*Dictionary*, 85) but as the verb is denominal the first and second forms may be interchangeable. Other possibilities are that the second form is intensive (“to crucify with great violence”) or numerically extensive (“to crucify in large numbers”).

Crucifixion as a pre-Islamic punishment

Crucifixion was widely practiced in antiquity. Herodotus (fifth century b.c.e.) makes numerous references to its employment by the Persians and other classical authors testify to its currency amongst Indians, Assyrians, Celts, Carthaginians and Romans ¶ (M. Hengel, *Crucifixion*, 4-5). According to the Gospels, when the Romans crucified Jesus they nailed him to a cross which had to be carried to the site of execution (e.g. *John* 19:17-23; 20:25). However, Paul equates crucifixion with hanging on a tree (*Gal* 3:13; cf. *Deut* 21:23).

In the Qur'ān, crucifixion is associated principally with ancient [Egypt](#) (q.v.). [Joseph](#) (q.v.) interprets the dream (see [dreams and sleep](#)) of a fellow prisoner to mean that the latter will be crucified and [birds](#) will eat from his head (q 12:41; cf. *Gen* 40:23, where Pharaoh's chief baker is hanged on a tree; see [bread](#)). Another instance occurs in reference to [Moses](#) (q.v.). When Pharaoh's magicians testify to their [belief](#) in the God of Moses, [Pharaoh](#) (q.v.) says that he will cut off their hands and [feet](#) on opposite sides and crucify them (q 7:124; 20:71; 26:49). We are not given details of the procedure, although in one of these Qur'ānic references, Pharaoh tells his magicians that he will crucify them “on the trunks of palm [trees](#) (q.v.)” (q 20:71).

The non-crucifixion of Jesus

The Qur'ān takes the Jews to task for claiming that they killed [Jesus](#) (q.v..) and it states that they did not kill him or crucify him but that it appeared so to them (q 4:157; see [jews and judaism](#); [christians and christianity](#)). According to the traditional Sunnī and Shī'ī commentators, God raised him alive to [heaven](#), having first projected his likeness onto someone else whom the Jews crucified in the [belief](#) that he was Jesus. In support of this interpretation, they cite ḥadīths which state that Jesus will descend to kill the [Antichrist](#) (q.v.) before he dies (see [apocalypse](#); [eschatology](#)), as well as reports attributed to the early exegetes Ibn 'Abbās (d. 68/686-8), Wahb b. Munabbih (d. 110 or 114 a.h.) and al-Suddī¶ (d. ca. 127/745) which narrate how God outwitted the Jews (N. Robinson, *Christ in Islam*, 127-41, 171-2). Muslim rationalists were quick to point out the difficulties in the projection theory. Some of them proposed more credible alternatives, e.g. that the authorities, after failing to arrest Jesus, knowingly crucified another person and that the crowds were misled into thinking that the substitute was Jesus because they were kept at a distance and his appearance was disfigured by the ordeal (N. Robinson, *Christ in Islam*, 136-8, 172; see [polemics and polemical language](#)).

As some pre-Islamic texts such as the gnostic *Apocalypse of Peter* discovered at Nag Hammadi mention the crucifixion of a substitute, it is possible that the traditional

commentators have interpreted this verse correctly. However, Christian apologists have long argued that q 4:157 does not actually deny that Jesus was crucified, but rather, that it denies that it was the Jews who crucified him. This accords with the [gospel](#) accounts, which attribute his execution to the Romans (N. Robinson, *Christ in Islam*, 108-9). Christian apologists also draw attention to q 3:55, which seems to imply that Jesus' death is in the past and to q 3:169, which asserts that Muslim martyrs are alive with God. The Brethren of Purity (see [brother and brotherhood](#)) apparently accepted these arguments and adopted the view that Jesus' [body](#) was nailed to the cross but that his spirit was raised alive into God's presence (N. Robinson, *Christ in Islam*, 56).

M.Z. Khan's translation of q 4:157 (...“those who have differed in the matter of his having been taken down alive from the cross are certainly in a state of [doubt](#) concerning it”...) gives the impression that the Arabic explicitly states that Jesus was taken down alive from the cross. However, as the Arabic reads: *wa-inna lladhīna khtalafū fīhi la-fī shakkin minhu*, a more literal translation would be along the lines of “those who have differed in it are certainly in a state of [doubt](#) concerning it.” He also renders q 2:72-5 so as to allude to the crucifixion. His rendition of q 2:72-3, in particular, is at variance with the Arabic: “Call to mind also when you claimed to have brought about the death of a Personage [*wa-idh qataltum nafsan*, lit. “and when you killed a man”] and then differed among yourselves concerning it, and Allah would bring to mind that which you concealed. So We said: ‘Test the crucial question by putting together other incidents relating to the affair and you will arrive at the truth.’ Thus does Allah plan to preserve alive those considered dead [*kadhālika yuḥyi llāhu l-mawtā*, lit. “thus does God make the dead alive”] and shows you His Signs that you may understand.” The interpretations conveyed in this translation, corresponding to the teaching of the [Aḥmadiyya](#) (q.v.), have no textual basis.

Crucifixion as a divinely-ordained punishment?

The traditional interpretation of q 5:33 is that it prescribes crucifixion as one of four possible punishments for brigandage. The basis for this view is a ḥadīth which states that the verse (*āya*) was revealed when some people from the tribe of ‘Ukl abused the Prophet's hospitality by killing a herdsman and stealing [cattle](#) (Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, viii, 201-2; see [occasions of revelation](#)). Without mentioning this ḥadīth, M. Asad argues that the Qur’ān would hardly promulgate a divine law which advocated a punishment identical to that inflicted by Pharaoh, whose qur’ānic characterization is that of an enemy of God.

Asad suggests that the *āya* is not a legal injunction, but rather a description of what the unbelievers were doing to each other in their perverseness (*The message*, 148-9; see [chastisement and punishment](#); [belief and unbelief](#); [gratitude and ingratitude](#); [disobedience](#); [law and the qur'ān](#)).

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Cite this page

Robinson, Neal, “Crucifixion”, in: *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*, General Editor: Jane Dammen McAuliffe, Georgetown University, Washington DC. Consulted online on 04 January 2019 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1875-3922_q3_EQCOM_00046>

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