

Did Jesus Really Die On The Cross?

The idea that Jesus didn't die on the cross can be found in the Quran, in popular literature of the 20th century, and in conspiracy theories throughout the last 2000 years. The Quran doesn't actually deny that the crucifixion took place, but it does say that Jesus only appeared to die on the cross and was instead taken up into Heaven (Surah 4:157 -158). Muslims traditionally believe it was Judas who was substituted for Jesus because the God of the Quran would not dishonor Jesus, his chosen prophet, by allowing him to die a shameful death on a cross. There is also a swoon theory that has continued through popular literature and conspiracy theories that Jesus did not actually die on the cross and was later resuscitated. So, what is the evidence that he really did die?

All four Gospels include narratives of Jesus' death on the cross. Each Gospel also includes multiple predictions of Jesus' death made by Jesus himself. In Matthew 20:18-19, Jesus says, "We are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will turn him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified. On the third day he will be raised to life." The Bible makes it very clear that Jesus knew he was going to die, that he came to earth to die and be raised to life to free people from bondage to sin, and that he actually was handed over to the Romans to be tortured and then killed on a cross.

In addition to the four Gospels and a number of letters contained in the New Testament (all of which were written in the first century), Jesus' execution is even reported by a number of ancient non-Christian sources. Josephus (late first century), Tacitus (early second century), Lucian (early to mid second century), and Mara bar Serapion (second to third centuries) all report the event. The fact that these non-Christians mentioned Jesus in their writings shows that Jesus' death was known outside of Christian circles and was not something the Christians invented.

What about the swoon theory, which proposes that Jesus appeared to die on the cross? An analysis of the Bible's narrative of Jesus' death from a historical and medical perspective decisively comes to the conclusion that Jesus could not have come down from the cross alive. "He was already in hypovolemic shock from the massive blood loss even before the crucifixion started. He couldn't possibly have faked his death, because you can't fake the inability to breathe for long. Besides, the spear thrust into his heart would have settled the issue one and for all. And the Romans weren't about to risk their own death by allowing him to walk away alive."¹

Could Jesus have been miraculously replaced by another person and gone into Heaven? The Bible has the unique message that Jesus actually did die on the cross for the sins of the world and that this cross of ultimate shame was really the place of ultimate glory. Is it more disrespectful of God to say that God would deceive by replacing Jesus with someone who looks like him or to say that God is able to raise His Prophet from the dead and to thereby conquer sin for all humanity? And would Jesus' followers have sacrificed their lives for someone who didn't actually die and resurrect? The evidence is overwhelming that Jesus did die on the cross. Each person must make the personal decision as to whether or not Jesus died for them. "For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive by the Spirit (1 Peter 3:18)."

¹ Lee Strobel, *The Case For Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998), p. 201