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# TRADITIONAL MUSLIM “SUBSTITUTIONIST” INTERPRETATION OF JESUS’ CRUCIFIXION: A CRITICAL PRESENTATION

## INRODUCTION

From the very beginning of Islam, Muslims had constant contact with peoples of other religions. On the Arabian Peninsula, apart from different Arab tribes, there were many established Jewish communities. Different Christian denominations also had a very strong influence on that part of the world. This regular encounter between Islam and other religions had an indisputable role in the exegesis of the Quranic text. Representatives of different faiths emphasized the passages in the Quran which concerned their own fundamental beliefs. For Christianity, we distinguish two principal dogmatic aspects where Muslim and Christian faiths not only differ but also split and diverge from one another. They have been widely commented on throughout the ages by interested parties from either side, and have provoked many discussions and quarrels, sometimes resulting in killings and deaths. The first point is the problem of Jesus Christ’s divinity as

the Son of God. The second is His crucifixion (Ayoub, 1980, s. 94). For Islam, which stresses *par excellence* the *tawwḥīd* – the unity and oneness of God – and condemns even the slightest symptom of *širk* – idolatry – associated with a unique God – it is evident that it refutes the belief in Jesus’s divinity. However, the denial of His crucifixion is not as evident as commonly assumed. This short essay aims to deal with the second of the disputable points between the two religions on the basis of the Quranic text, which mentions the crucifixion of Jesus:

وقولهم إنا قتلنا المسيح عيسى ابن مريم رسول الله وما قتلوه وما صلبوه ولكن شبه لهم وإن الذين اختلفوا فيه لفي شك منه ما لهم به من علم إلا اتباع الظن وما قتلوه يقينا [4:157] بل رفعه الله إليه و كان الله عزيزا حكيمًا [4:158]

*wa qawlihim 'innā qatalanā al-masīha 'īsā ibna maryama rasūla Allāhi wa mā qatalūhu wa mā ṣalabūhu walakin šubbiha lahum wa 'inna al-laḍīna iḥtalafū fihī lafi šakkin minhu mā lahum bihi min 'ilmīn illā ittbā'a al-ẓanni wa mā qatalūhu yaqīnan [Q 4:157] bal rafa 'ahu Allāhu ilayhi wa kāna Allāhu 'azīzan ḥakīman [4:158]*

AND FOR SAYING: "WE KILLED THE CHRIST, JESUS, SON OF MARY, WHO WAS AN APOSTLE OF GOD;" BUT THEY NEITHER KILLED NOR CRUCIFIED HIM, THOUGH IT SO APPEARED TO THEM. THOSE WHO DISAGREE IN THE MATTER ARE ONLY LOST IN DOUBT. THEY HAVE NO KNOWLEDGE ABOUT IT OTHER THAN CONJECTURE, FOR SURELY THEY DID NOT KILL HIM, [Q 4:157] BUT GOD RAISED HIM UP AND CLOSER TO HIMSELF; AND GOD IS ALL-MIGHTY AND ALL-WISE. [Q 4:158]<sup>1</sup>.

The main goal of this essay is firstly to present the principal common traditional Muslim interpretation which has influenced Islamic understanding of the Crucifixion until this day, giving it “orthodoxy”, and then to question and object to this interpretation, thus revealing the puzzling complexity of the subject. In the last part of the essay, other possibilities of “non-canonical” *tafsīr* are given. Such possibilities appeared throughout the centuries although they gained neither a wide interest nor acceptance in the traditional understanding of the Muslim world.

1 The Quran’s translations in the essay are mostly based on Ahmed Ali’s version with my own eventual arrangements.

## THE LINGUISTIC PROBLEM OF ŠUBBIHA LAHUM

Before moving to the principal part of this essay, some necessary clarifications must be made. The overall Quranic text of “crucifixion” has been presented; the wider approach to the issue dealt with herein. The narrower approach focuses on a very short phrase in Q 4:157 *šubbiha lahum*. This short phrase has been causing most of the problems in understanding the whole subject. Any attempt to translate it only seems to complicate matters and does not really help. Unfortunately, there is no other solution but to accept this inconvenience and try to explain its linguistic complexity.

The locution *šubbiha lahum* contains an Arabic three-rooted verb *š – b – h* which occurs in the Quran ten times in different forms<sup>2</sup>. The meaning of the verb changes according to the form of the verb. *Šubbiha* is the passive verb of the second form which may assume another two different forms (the fifth and the eighth) with which it is synonymous (Lane, 1872, s.1499). Therefore, it is quite idiomatic and becomes ambiguous when translated. In addition, there is the fact that the second form of *š – b – h* is represented only once in the Quran, which excludes any possibility of comparison with others contexts, consequently making it difficult to interpret exactly what the Quranic revelation means by *šubbiha lahum*. In Hans Wehr’s dictionary, the following translations are found: Second form: “to make equal or similar, to compare, liken; passive form: to be doubtful, dubious, uncertain, obscure”. Fifth form:”to compare, to imitate, copy. Sixth form: to resemble one another, to be similar to one another, to be equal to one another, be identical, to be ambiguous, unclear” (Wehr, 1994, s. 530). Below is a list of instances of different translations of *šubbiha lahum* into English by Muslim and non-Muslim scholars<sup>3</sup>:

- Ahmed Ali : it so appeared to them
- Ahmed Raza Khan: a look-alike was created for them
- Arberry: a likeness of that was shown to them
- Asad: it only seemed to them [as if it had been] so
- Daryabadi: it was made dubious unto them
- Hilali & Khan: the resemblance of 'Iesa (Jesus) was put over another man (and they killed that man)
- Itani: it appeared to them as if they did
- Maududi: the matter was made dubious to them
- Pickthall: it appeared so unto them

2 Twelve appearances of verb *š – b – h* in the Quran: 2: 25; 2:70; 2:118; 3:7 (twice); 4:157; 6:99 (twice); 6:141; 39:23.

3 The different translations are taken from: tanzil.net

- Qarai: so it was made to appear to them
- Qaribullah & Darwish: to them, he (the crucified) had been given the look (of Prophet Jesus)
- Saheeh International : [another] was made to resemble him to them
- Sarwar: They, in fact, murdered someone else by mistake
- Shakir: it appeared to them so (like Isa)
- Wahiduddin Khan: it only seemed to them [as if it had been so]
- Yusuf Ali: so it was made to appear to them

Thus, it can be acknowledged that *šubbiha lahum* has a wide range of possible translations which explains the reason for the numerous problems it has created for exegesis throughout the centuries until this day. The following paragraphs illustrate how the “orthodox” interpretation came into existence, which persons and facts had the greatest influence on its establishment and how it developed.

## **TRADITIONAL MUSLIM INTERPRETATION OF JESUS’ CRUCIFIXION**

### **Role of Non-Muslim Approaches**

It is quite astonishing that the first reflections on Jesus’s death on the cross were prompted by non-Muslims. The paramount role of such reflections was played by the last of the Eastern Church Fathers –John of Damascus. Unconsciously, he set up the main stream Muslim belief about Jesus’s death which lasted for many centuries. Even nowadays most modern Western scholars claim with assurance that his theological treatise *De Haeresibus* is the first point of reference regarding the denial of Jesus’s real crucifixion (Sarrió Cucarella, 2015, s. 142) where the author explains the Muslim belief: “And that the Jews, having themselves violated the Law, wanted to crucify his shadow, but Christ himself, they say, was not crucified nor did he die; for God took him up to himself into heaven because he loved him” ( Sahas, 1972, s, 133). John’s statement that Jesus was not crucified is unquestionable and does not leave any place for doubt. However, one should consider the problem to be bigger and more complex problem than a single quotation. John of Damascus did not write *De Hearesibus* as an apologetic dialog in polemic with Muslim scholar or *mufassir* – *Muslim traditional interpreter of Quran*. His treatise was a part of a bigger work *Fountain of Knowledge* (*ibidem*, s. 55) written in Greek (not Arabic) for the sake of the Christian believers as a kind of instruction about heresies and orthodoxies. His essay contains 101 chapters where each is devoted to a different heresy. Only chapter 101 (hypothetically not even written by the author, but added much later (*ibidem*, s. 62–65) concerns the heresy of the *Saracens* (*ibidem*, s. 95)

– *Muslims*. All this indicates that John did not do thorough research on the analysis of the original Arabic text and *tafsīr*. What he knew was the circulated common idea that Muslims deny crucifixion (Robinson, 1991, s. 107).

His followers, starting from Abū Qurra (Sahas, 1972, s. 100 –102), Catholicos Timothy I and others throughout the centuries, took his ideas for granted and always referred to him in discussion of and encounter with Islam (Robinson, 1991, s.107). It caused scholars' research on the origin of the denial of Jesus's crucifixion by Muslims in different Christian heresies which were spread widely throughout the Arabian Peninsula during the time of Muḥammad (Ketema, 1997, II). It involves many discussions and scholarly postulations over different gnostic doctrinal influences on Islam such as Ebionites, Elchasaites, Basilids, Nazoreans, Nestorians, Melekites, Jacobites and other Syriac-speaking communities. The most accepted theory by Western scholars is the docetist understanding of the matter, which somehow includes the above mentioned groups. The term Docetism is derived from the Greek language from the verb *dokeō* – “to seem” or noun *dokesis* – “appearance” and concerns the nature of Christ. It refutes the existence of Jesus Christ in a real body claiming that He was not really incarnate and that He existed as an appearance of a human being (Gardner, 2005, s. 2381). The non-canonical book the *Acts of John* is a good example of Docetism's view of the crucifixion. It proves that Jesus did not actually die on the cross but only appeared to do so. His body was reduced to a kind of phantom, which denies his death. “And my Lord stood in the middle of the cave and gave light to it and said, 'John, for the people below in Jerusalem I am being crucified and pierced with lances and reeds and given vinegar and gall to drink. But to you I am speaking and listen to what I speak” (Masson, 1976, s. 328). Jesus with his soul and body was not present at the moment of crucifixion which assumes that someone else or something else died instead of Jesus, exactly as we have read in John of Damascus's explanation where Jesus's *shadow* was crucified. Another important apocryphal account can be found in the *Gospel of Peter*. It differs from the *Act of John* in the way that Jesus was crucified in his body but his divine substance escaped to God at the moment of Passion and death. Jesus is seen as a triumphant lord who controls pain and suffering and is finally elevated from the cross. “Et ils amenèrent deux malfaiteurs et ils crucifièrent le Seigneur au milieu d'eux. Mais lui se taisait comme s'il n'éprouvait aucune souffrance [...] Et le Seigneur cria 'Ma force, ô force tu m'a abandonné” (Amiot, 1952, s. 139–140).

Through these two examples, we are able to distinguish between two main types of Docetism with regard to Passion, the crucifixion and the death of Christ. The first one, which requires a substitute who takes the place of Jesus, is

called “literal Docetism”, and the second one is called “figurative Docetism”, which presupposes the real crucifixion of Jesus’s body to be distinct from his divine reality and nature (Lawson, 2009, s. 3–4). Scholars agree about these two main alternatives in terms of their explaining the origin of traditional Muslim interpretations of *šubbiha lahum*, as we will see in the next paragraph that the Docetists’ theories are very similar to them. However, there is an essential difference between the principal idea and reason for denying Jesus’s crucifixion in Islam and in Docetism; they cannot be easily linked together, because while Docetism tries to prove and save the divinity of Jesus Christ by neglecting his humanity, Islam tries to show the complete absurdity of His divinity, underlining his human nature strengthened by God for his prophetic mission. Moreover, any other influences of Docetism or its connections with the Quran cannot be found” (Fonner, 1992, s. 444). Thus, it can be asserted that Muslim tradition never attempted to adopt any Docetic position in interpreting the words *šubbiha lahum*; rather it is substitutionist.

### **Substitution as a Muslim Classical Interpretation of *šubbiha lahum***

The substitutionist interpretation of the Quranic verse 4:157 is the oldest traditional commentary in Islamic *tafsīr*. It was given by ‘Abd Allah Ibn ‘Abbās (d.69.687) who, at a very young age, became a master of prophetic traditions. Sunnis recognized him as a progenitor of Quran’s commentary (Vaglieri, 1986, s. 40–41). In his commentary *Tanwīr al-miqbās* he gives the essence of the conception of substitution, which is the replacement of Jesus by another person. ‘Abbās mentions three times a person named Naṭyānūs upon who God cast likeness (*šibh*) and he was killed (destroyed) instead of Christ. *’ahlaka Allahu šāhibahum Naṭyānūs (wa mā qatalūhu wa mā šalabūhu walakin šubbiha lahum) ’alqā šibha ’aīsā ’alā Naṭyānūs fa qatalūhu badala aīsā ( wa ’in al-dīna ’iḥtalafū fihī) fī qatlihi (lafī šakki minhu) min qatlihi (mā lahum bihi) biqatlihi* (Abū Ṭāhir Muḥammad, 1951, s. 68). Ibn ‘Abbās traced the “orthodox” path of the substitutionist interpretation, but the man who rooted it is Abū Ğāfar al-Ṭabarī (d.310/923). He was the first person to collect numerous different substitutionist stories about the crucifixion of Jesus, in his famous *tafsīr*. All of those reports agree on one central point, that Jesus did not die. However, they differ tremendously in their explanation of his substitution. Who or what replaced Jesus and died on the cross? How did it happen? How many people received a semblance of Jesus? Who caused such an intervention of saving Jesus from crucifixion and what for? Ṭabarī’s presents approximately a dozen of reports, but he personally chooses a Jewish convert Wahab bin Munabbih as the most reliable source. We find in two of his reports, that each one has a different

*isnād* – chain of transmission, both of them say that all the disciples were made similar to Jesus and that the Jews killed one of them thinking that it is He.

Jesus went into a house together with his seventeen disciples. The Jews surrounded them but when they burst in *ṣawwaruhum Allah kulluhum ‘alā ṣūrati ‘āisa*. They said to them: ‘You bewitched us! Either you expose Jesus for us or we will kill you all!’ Jesus said to his companions: ‘Who of you purchases the paradise for himself today?’. One man of them said: ‘Me!’ then he went outside to them and said: ‘I am Jesus’ *wa qad ṣawwarahu Allahu ‘alā ṣūrati ‘āisa*. The Christians thought in that way that he was Jesus. God raised Jesus in that day (al-Ṭabarī, 1955, s. 368).

The second report, a much longer one, starts when Jesus is troubled about his death. He called his disciples to have the last supper with them. After he served them a meal and washed their hands, he revealed to them his coming death and asked them to pray to God that his fate might be postponed. However, his disciples went away and scattered. The Jews were searching for Jesus and stopped different apostles who all denied being one of his companions. The next morning one of the disciples went to the Jews and made a deal with them; he would lead them to Jesus for thirty dirhams. However, before it happened, the appearance of the disciple was changed. *Wa kāna ṣubbiha ‘alyhim qabla ḍalika (ibidem, s. 369)* Thus, the Jews were convinced it was Jesus. They tied him and drove around mocking and humiliating him. Finally, they crucified what appeared to them. *wa ṣalabū mā ṣubbiha lahum (ibidem)*. At the end of Wahab’s story, Jesus appeared to his mother and the woman he had freed from the devil’s possession, explaining that God had raised him without any harm (*ibidem*).

What makes it different from the previous story is not only its length but also the voluntary acceptance of sacrifice for the sake of Jesus by a disciple. Ṭabarī also gives other nine reports which are mostly similar to this voluntary conception. Qatāda Ibn Dī‘āma (d.117/735), in his two quite brief reports, does not mention the name of any person that was crucified. He focuses on Jesus who searches for help to avoid death, and his disciple who willingly assumes his identity, giving his life instead of his master’s for the cause of God (*fi sabīli Allāh*) (Lawson, 2009, s. 55). *‘ayakum yaqḍifu ‘alayhi ṣibhī, fa’innahu maqtūl? Faqāla raḡulun min ‘aṣḥābihi: ‘anā ya nabī Allāh!’ faqaatala ḍalika al-raḡula wa m’anā Allāh nabīhi wa rafa’ ‘ilayhi* (al-Ṭabarī, 1955, s. 370). Al-Suddī (d.127-744) adds to Wahab’s account a different number of Jesus’ companions. He mentions nineteen of them, which is the biggest number in any tradition. Moreover, Ishāq’s report, made out of three

different *hadīṭ*, changes that number, once as thirteen and once as twelve. He lists all of their names. Sarġas is one of those disciples who offers himself for the sake of Jesus and dies. We can also observe a few new facts. For the first time there is King Dā'ūd who is responsible for giving orders to kill Jesus. It seems that Ishāq wants to exclude the possibility that any of Jesus' companions could betray him (*ibidem*, s. 371–373).

Other reports given by Ṭabarī do not add anything new to the accounts just presented. All commentators and most modern scholars agree without doubt that Jesus did not die on the cross but was taken up by God. “The text [Q4:157] is most precise and the negations expressed in categorical fashion leaving no room for doubt or interpretation” (Borrmans, 1976, s. 3). The main points of disagreement among them are the number of Jesus's companions, how many of them assumed his appearance – one, or all of them – and eventually, who was crucified in his place. Besides *tafsīr* of Ṭabarī, we can also find other *mufassirūn* who built upon his account. One that is worth mentioning is Muqātil b.Suleymān al-Balaḥī (d.150-767). He made some variations and changes to the substitution concept. God does not cast appearance upon Jesus's companions but on the person he wants to punish. This person is a man called Yāhūdhā (which should not be confused with Judas Iscariot) whom the Jews assigned to guarding Jesus. God sent on him the semblance of Jesus because Yāhūdhā cursed him with blasphemies and even harmed him physically. Afterwards Jesus was elevated alive to heaven from the mount of Jerusalem. Muqātil makes a special symbolic link between Muḥammad and Jesus by adding that it happened exactly on the same day when Muḥammad received the first revelation during the month of Ramaḍān, on the night of divine decree (Lawson, 2009, s. 60–61). With time, the accounts based on a “punishment” substitution gradually occupied the central place in the traditional interpretation and one encounters more often various accounts of how the Jews sent people to find Jesus and kill him. A man, who in previous reports was called Yāhūdhā, began to become Tityanus, Titabus or Titanus. He entered the house where Jesus was staying but he could not find him. God sent angel Gabriel to protect his servant, and, thus, Jesus through an opened roof was elevated. When the man came out, the appearance of his face has been already changed and he looked like Jesus. Assassins thinking that it was Jesus tied him with a rope and dragged him for crucifixion (Hayek, 1959, s. 220–232).

The substitutionist conception also continued during the medieval centuries. The famous Syrian historian Ibn Kaṭīr (b.774/1373) presents one of the richest substitution stories which is certainly based on the gospels' accounts. It returns to the idea of voluntary self-sacrifice by one of Jesus's companions. According to the account of Ibn Kaṭīr, the Jews envied Jesus because of his miracles and searched for

a way to kill him. They wrote to the king of Damascus, who worshipped the stars, accusing Jesus of misleading people. The king wrote to his deputy in Jerusalem and ordered him to place thorns on his head and crucify him. Therefore, a group of Jews went to the house where Jesus was, with his twelve or thirteen apostles. It was on a Friday afternoon. Jesus was aware of the danger so he asked which one of his disciples could bear his appearance and take his place. A young man stepped forward. Jesus seeing that he was very young repeated his request three times; however, only the young one volunteered. As soon as Jesus accepted the young man, he was taken to heaven through the roof. The apostles went out of the house and the young man was seized and crucified. The Jews announced it and many Christians believed their claims (Kaṭīr Ibn 'Imad, 1957, s. 28–34) . That is why Ibn Kaṭīr comments that Jesus's disciples were divided into three sects. The people of the first sect were the Jacobites who said: “God remained with us as long as He willed and then ascended to heaven”. The second were the Nestorians: “The son of God was with us as long as he willed and God took him to heaven” and the last group was the Muslims: ““The servant and Messenger of God remained with us as long as God willed and then God took him to Him.’ The two disbelieving groups cooperated against the Muslim group and they killed them. Ever since that happened, Islam was then veiled until God sent Muhammad” (Kaṭīr Ibn 'Imad, b.r. w., s. 573–574). The last position that influenced most of the later commentaries till contemporary substitutionist interpretations is the apocryphal Gospel of Barnabas. That book was found at the beginning of eighteenth century and is very often used as a polemic with Christianity, even to the point that some Muslim scholars recognize it as a part of an authentic Gospel which was lost during the century or is hidden and guarded in the Vatican library (Ayoub, 2007, s. 173). Most probably the book was written in a fourteenth century Muslim environment by a convert to Islam. It is written in Old Italian with some vocabulary from the Venetian dialect. According to the prologue, the author wrote it to correct St. Paul's errors and deceits. It tells the stories about Jesus's life, however, in total accordance with the principal Muslim dogmas. Jesus is not a son of God but one of the prophets who announces the coming of the Muḥammad (Jomier, 1978, s. 128–130; Cirillo, Fremaux, 1977). What is important for us, is that Judas is crucified instead of Jesus. God casts Jesus's likeness upon Judas's face and voice, and elevates Jesus with the company of Angels to heaven.

When the soldiers with Judas drew near to the place where Jesus was, Jesus heard the approach of many people, therefore in fear he withdrew into the house, and the eleven were sleeping. Then God, seeing the danger of his servant, commanded Gabriel, Michael, Rafael and Uriel,

his ministers, to take Jesus out of the world. The holy angels came and took Jesus out by the window that looks toward the South. They carried him and placed him in the third heaven in the company of angels blessing God for evermore (*The Gospel of Barnabas*, 215; Ragg, 1907)<sup>4</sup>. Judas entered impetuously before all into the chamber whence Jesus had been taken up. And the disciples were sleeping. Whereupon the wonderful God acted wonderfully, insomuch that Judas was so changed in speech and in face to be like Jesus that we believed him to be Jesus. And he, having awakened us, was seeking where the Master was. Whereupon we marveled and answered: 'You, Lord, are our master; have you now forgotten us?' And he, smiling, said: 'Now are you foolish, that know not me to be Judas Iscariot!' And as he was saying this the soldiery entered and laid their hands upon Judas, because he was in every way like Jesus (*The Gospel of Barnabas*, 216). [...] The soldiers took Judas and bound him, not without derision. For he truthfully denied that he was Jesus and the soldiers, mocking him, said: 'Sir, fear not, for we are come to make you king of Israel, and we have bound you because we know that you do refuse the kingdom.' Judas answered: 'Now have you lost your senses! You are come to take Jesus of Nazareth with arms and lanterns and you have bound me that have guided you, to make me king!' Then the soldiers lost their patience, and with blows and kicks they began to flout Judas, and they led him with fury into Jerusalem. [...] Judas answered: 'I have told you that I am Judas Iscariot, who promised to give into your hands Jesus the Nazarene; and you, by what are I know not, are beside yourselves, for you will have it by every means that I am Jesus.' The high priest answered: 'O perverse seducer, you have deceived all Israel, beginning from Galilee even to Jerusalem here, with your doctrine and false miracles and now think you to flee the merited punishment that befits you by feigning to be mad?[...] So they led him to Mount Calvary where they used to hang malefactors and there they crucified him naked for the greater ignominy. Judas truly did nothing else but cry out: 'God, why have you forsaken me, seeing the malefactor has escaped and I die unjustly?' Truly I say that the voice, the face, and the person of Judas were so like to Jesus, that his disciples and believers entirely believed that he was Jesus (*ibidem*, 217).

4 The second position is very rare to find and it was unavailable to me; thus, the decision to do research via the Internet.

The *Gospel of Barnabas* was translated into Arabic by the Lebanese Antūn Saādi in the first half of the twentieth century, and gained a paramount role in modern Muslim exegesis, although the exegetes are conscious of its late origin (Ayoub, 2007, s. 173). They accept it fully or partially as a reliable source. The first modern Muslim scholar who almost totally relied on this non-canonical Gospel was Rašīd Riḍā (d. 1354/ 1935) (Jomier, 1978, s. 128–130). It was only a matter of time until others followed him. For instance, Sayyid Quṭb (d.1386/1966) very willingly quotes long passages from *Barnabas* in his *tafsīr* book *In the Shade of the Quran*. According to his accounts Jesus and the apostles were sleeping in the house. When Judas entered inside, Jesus was taken away by angels and carried to heaven. His voice and appearance were cast upon Judas. Afterwards Judas awakened the other companions asking them where Jesus is. But the apostles saw the semblance of Jesus, and thus they thought it was Jesus himself. They presumed he was really scared and confused about his death. Afterwards the Jews with the Romans seized Judas and crucified him. Later, after three days, Jesus appeared to Maryam and the apostles, reassuring them that he did not die, and announcing to them the coming of Muḥammad (Qutb, 1971, s. 587–588). This is just one example of a modern interpretation based on the non-canonical Gospel of Barnabas, which is quite enough to prove its strong influence, not only on *mufassirūn* but also on some Islamic sects, or groups who use its text for their own objectives. One of those groups is the *Aḥmadiya* Muslim messianic movement, founded in Panḡāb, which believes in the substitutionist version of crucifixion. They claim that Jesus, as Moses, went to die alone, and his tomb is located in Kašmīr (Smith, 1986, s. 301–303).

We have just briefly presented the principal “orthodox” interpretations of *šubbiha lahum*. We have noted three main points which played an unquestionable role in the wide spreading of substitutionist exegesis: the role of St. John of Damascus, who was the first to deny Jesus’s death describing Muslim faith; then al-Ḥabari’s collection of various reports which gave force to the main current Muslim commentators; and, finally, the *Gospel of Barnabas* which has resulted in the Muslim conviction of the validity of such an interpretation, up to the point of its sanctification. We also note the evolution in the *tafsīr*. We can distinguish a few different stages of development in the theory of substitution and attempt to classify them in following points and features.

1. *Thing substitution* – God took a *šay’* – an elusive thing such as a shadow which took the place of Jesus. This ambiguity involves wondering what it could be, so we find surmises regarding this: it was a ghost, a phantom, etc.
2. *Unknown person substitution* – In the next step we find already a man

who is chosen by God's decree for death. In that way Jesus is saved. Both the Jews and the apostles agree that the real Jesus was killed. They are not able to recognize the replacement. The reports still do not tell us who it was.

3. *Known person substitution* – Names of very different people appear in traditions, which gives the possibility of identifying him.
4. *Unknown voluntary substitution* – One of Jesus's companions who voluntarily replaces him. An apostle who voluntarily accepts to be given the semblance of Jesus, and to die on the cross.
5. *Known voluntary substitution* – Various names and characteristics of the volunteer disciple begin to be mentioned. Jesus is disturbed and confused because of his coming death. Out of fear, he asks his companions to make a sacrifice and die instead of him.
6. *Unknown punishment substitution* – here the person who is crucified, deserves to be lost but the person is not specified.
7. *Known punishment substitution* – Many different individuals, mostly from among the Jews, are specified. They are punished by God for their blasphemies and calumnies.
8. *Judas punishment substitution*. However the most preferable person who deserves to be killed is Judas Iscariot. God in his Justice wants to reward him for his act of betrayal.

In this first part of this essay, our aim was to present and summarise the most widespread interpretations of Q 4:157. Commentaries on Islamic tradition are unanimous in interpreting this passage as a denial of Jesus's crucifixion. The problem for Muslim interpreters was not found in the question: Was Jesus crucified or not? But rather in the concern: Who or what was crucified in his place? We also tried to present the common thinking among scholars, who take for granted the relation and dependency between Docetism and Islamic tradition, which are different, despite their obvious similarities. In the next part of the essay, we aim to criticize the discussed substitutionist theory and show the problems it raises, and present other points of view.

## CONTESTATION OF TRADITIONAL SUBSTITUTIONIST INTERPRETATION

### Quranic Context of the Verse 4:157

Till now we have focused on commentaries of the text given by different *mufassirūn*. However, we cannot forget what the basis of Quranic exegesis is. The

Quran itself is the first source and everybody agrees with it. Thus, we are obliged to examine the Quranic context of our verse and examine it from its own perspective. We should exclude for a moment the substitutionist theory so as not to be charged with its ideas, as most researches are by John of Damascus or al-Ṭabarī, unless the dimension of analysis stays narrow and focused only on the denial of the historicity of Jesus's crucifixion, and consequently of his eventual death. Nevertheless, having read the whole Quran, we note that Jesus's crucifixion is mentioned only once, whilst Jesus's name appears ninety three times. If we compare it to the overall number of verses, it gives a result of less than one in over six thousands (Lawson, 2009, s. 14) which makes it almost irrelevant or at least understated, in the sense that the mentioned crucifixion is not a crucial point in the Quranic revelation. To confirm that, we should also note that the "crucifixion verse" does not have the *'asbāb al-nuzūl* – occasions of revelations. By stating this fact, it is obvious that what seems so important for Christians is not that important from the Islamic point of view.

Neither Muḥammad nor his companions or later followers explain to their community of faith what the cause of the revelation was. Thus we can consider two options: either the verse has little value or meaning, or it does not need any special explanations because it is clear enough from its context. As the first option is hardly acceptable, since it would mean saying that divine verse has no worth, we cannot object to the second option. So now we need to examine now the context where the verse is located. The revelation starting from verse 4: 153 deals with the issue of *kufr* – idolatry and more precisely with the infidelity of the Jews. We point out a list of twelve transgressions against God: 1. creating a calf and worshipping it (Q4:153), 2. breaking their covenant with God, 3. disbelieving in his miraculous signs, 4. slaying the prophets wrongfully, 5. the hardness of their hearts (Q 4: 155), 6. their general disbelief, 7. speaking against Maryam, a tremendous calumny (Q 4:156), 8. claiming that they killed and crucified the Messiah, Jesus, son of Maryam, messenger of God (Q 4:157), 9. their general wrongdoing, 10. hindering others in God's way (Q 4: 160), 11. taking usury, 12. devouring people's wealth by false pretenses (Q 4:161). The provided list contains the "crucifixion" verse, which makes it clear enough for us that its context is not a threat for Christian belief. The purpose is to condemn *kufr* some of the Jews and their blasphemous actions. Thus, we have to admit with assurance that the "crucifixion" verse is not a field of discussion or argument against historicity of Jesus's death on the cross (Raynolds, 2009, s. 251–252). We should not inspect the Quran to establish whether Jesus was crucified or not. All we can say as fact is that this part of sūra is a strong rebuke towards a group of Jews who went astray from *sabīl Allah*. Some commentators link

this rebuking passage with another verse Q 3:55 (“When God said: ‘O Jesus, I will take you to Myself and exalt you, and rid you of the infidels, and hold those who follow you above those who disbelieve till the Day of Resurrection. You have then to come back to Me when I will judge between you in what you were at variance’”) where Jesus will testify on the Day of Judgment against those who disbelieved and committed sins according to their acts that we have listed above.

All of this should convince us that in exegesis of this passage, we should turn our attention from what happened to Jesus to what the revelation says about the acts of *kufr* or about the Jews’ disbelief (Fonner, 1992, s. 439–440). Thus, we clearly see that it is not the revelation of the Quran which denies Jesus’s crucifixion, but rather the work of either Muslim or non-Muslim commentators throughout the ages. “What we can say is that The Qur’ān itself only asserts that Jews did not crucify Jesus. This is obviously different from saying that Jesus was not crucified. The point is that John of Damascus and many Qur’ān exegetes, though not the Qur’ān, deny crucifixion” (Lawson, 2009, s. 12). What then does the “crucifixion” verse deny, if not a historical fact? The various answers are presented in the following paragraphs. Only from the context of the scriptures can we see clearly that it was not the intention of the Quran to deny Jesus’s crucifixion. There are some contemporary Muslim scholars, such as Amer Al-Hafi<sup>5</sup> who certainly admit it.

و هذه الآية جاءت في سياق الرد على بني إسرائيل وافتخارهم بأنهم قتلوا المسيح، فالآية تنفي معنى القتل والصلب الذي يتصوره ويعتقده اليهود (أن المسيح كذاب وأنه ملعون لأنه علق على خشبة كالمجرمين) وهذا المعنى واضح من خلال تعليل القرآن لمقولتهم هذه وهو "شبه لهم"

( “This verse [Q4:157] came in the context of giving an account on the Israelites and their pride that they have killed the Messiah. The verse denies the meaning of the assassination and the crucifixion which the Jews imagined and claimed that Messiah is a cursed liar because he was hanged on wooden cross as criminals. This meaning is clear through the Quran’s analysis of their words, this is it what ‘appeared to them’”/Al-Hafi, 2015, s. 5–6/).

### Al-Zamahšarī’s Revolution

In the first part of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, the traditional approach to the crucifixion text was put in a new light. In his original *tafsīr*, Maḥmūd b. Umar al-

5 Dr Amer Al-Hafi is Jordanian professor of religions at the Royal Institute for Inter-Faith Studies (RIIFS) in Amman.

Zamaḥṣarī (d.538/1144) took a unique position in the science of Quranic exegesis. He was the first to object to the traditional interpretation based only on grammatical considerations and logic. What is really strange and astonishing is that he dealt with the text using the linguistic analysis and omitted or supposedly neglected all *isnād* – the sound chain of *hadīṭ* transmission. At first he reports two similar substitutionist stories, which differ with the other traditions known till his time. The first one tells how a band of Jews cursed Jesus and His mother, so Jesus said a prayer: “Oh God, you are my Lord and you created me by your word. Oh God curse those who have reviled me and my mother” (Al-Zamakhsharī , 1889, s. 238) Thus, God transformed them into monkeys and pigs. That is why Jews agreed to kill him. God let Jesus know about it and informed him that he would raise him to heaven and purify him from the company of the offenders. Then Jesus asked his disciples who would receive his semblance to be killed, crucified and enter paradise. One man voluntarily accepted. God cast upon him Jesus’s appearance and he was crucified. The second report says that the semblance was cast only upon on the face instead of the whole person. There was a man who faked belief in Jesus. When the Jews wanted to kill him, the man offered to point him out. When the traitor entered the house, God protected Jesus by raising him up to heaven and projected his appearance on the face of the man. Thus, they killed him thinking it was Jesus. Both of these reports seem unsatisfactory for al-Zamaḥṣarī. He mentions disagreement among people who put forward several questions and doubts: “He is a God, it is not true that he was killed”, “He has been killed and crucified”, “If he was Jesus so where is his companion? And if he was a companion so where is Jesus?” (*ibidem*). After those rhetorical questions the author of *al-kaššāf* begins his original grammatical analysis of the text. First of all, he poses a question: What is the subject of verb *šubbiha*? What does it refer to as a predicate? He considers three different possibilities: the subject is Jesus or a person whom they killed or the verb is impersonal (*ibidem*, s. 238–239). Todd Lawson summarizes al-Zamaḥṣarī’s analysis as follows:

Al-Zamakhsharī states that if *shubbiha* has Jesus as its subject, then someone or something is likened to him – not the other way around. Since this someone or something is never specified in the Qur’an, such a reading is impossible – presumably because one of the purposes of the Book is to instruct the faithful and an allusion to the unknown cannot be considered instructive. The only alternative then is to read *shubbiha* as referring to the most readily available object at hand, namely the prepositional phrase *lahum*. Thus the understood subject of the verb is the impersonal pronoun, i.e. ‘It [the affair of the crucifixion] was made obscure to them.’[...] Thus, the

following translation emerges: THEY KILLED HIM NOT, NOR DID THEY CRUCIFY HIM, BUT THE AFFAIR WAS IMAGED SO TO THEM (Lawson, 2009, s. 102).

Al-Zamaḥṣarī had a new revolutionary point of view for approaching and understanding the crucifixion text. He made a sort of “*tafsīr’s* shift”. It was no longer somebody or something else who received the appearance of Jesus but it was the “affair” which rendered obscurity. He broke the myth of the substitutionist legends which had arisen around Jesus’s crucifixion and opened a new door for other *mufassirin* to develop his idea, creating an opportunity for different interpretations, for instance, *Ši’as* or modern ones. However, this concept did not gain a paramount acceptance in the Muslim world. Following him, exegetes such as al-Bayḍāwī (d.625/1286) and later al-Rāzī (d.606/1209) repeated his logic and used his idea, which helped them to question the substitutionist theory.

### Al - Rāzī’s Criticism

Al - Rāzī went much further than al-Zamaḥṣarī in his monumental Sunni exegesis. His complex work gathered all known resources from different fields of science; thus, he gained an unquestionably high position in the Muslim history of *tafsīr*. He also gives various very interesting analyses of Jesus’ crucifixion. At first he explains the context in which the Jews wanted to disparage and mock Jesus, which indicates that it was an act of great *kufur*. As an example of this kind of *kufur*, he quotes two different *sūras* ("إِنَّ الرَّسُولَ الَّذِي أُرْسِلَ إِلَيْكُمْ لَمَجْنُونٌ" Q26:27 and Q15:6 "يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ نَزَلَ عَلَيْهِ الذِّكْرُ إِنَّكَ لَمَجْنُونٌ") where Muḥammad was also mocked of being mad. From his analysis we clearly see that he did not consider the whole context of the historical event of crucifixion; rather he recognizes it as an instance of the worst act of *kufur*. After this introduction, he made a statement, as al-Zamaḥṣarī did, explaining, as mentioned above, the grammatically puzzling problem which indicates the “affair” to be an obscure *šubbiha* (not a person). Later he presents different reports of “semblance” stories which vary in many details as we saw in the first part of this essay. They are very similar to Ibn ‘Abbās’ and al-Ṭabarī’s stories. Al-Rāzī eventually adds some slight differences, like the King of Jews searched to kill Jesus but angel Gabriel never left him get close, not even for an hour; he strengthened Jesus and made him escape by the skylight.

Another example of the differences is that the Jews persecuted Jesus’s disciples but the Roman Emperor, who became a Christian and hid the crucified body, began worshipping the cross and punished the Jews (al-Rāzī, 1990, s. 261–262).

However, this research is concerned with his most interesting new approach where he tries to refute or at least question all of these substitution ideas. He introduces a new problem which concerns the logical possibility of God's transferring the identity of one man to another. According to him, such a possibility unfortunately leads into sophistry. If one person were able to receive the resemblance of somebody else in such a way that nobody could recognize his real identity, it might cause a huge chaos. One could not be entirely sure what is happening. It would open the door for the incertitude of any single act done by any individual. How could we be sure who is who if it were possible for someone to be replaced by somebody else? Any historical event, any legal act might become fake. Socially speaking, we would never know who had signed legal contracts and documents in cases such as marriage, divorce, inheritance etc. Doubt could enter any aspect of people's life until finally we could not be sure of who had died and who is still alive. Looking at it from the Muslim point of view, we would have to admit openly that all *šarīya* – religious laws and the credibility of all persons who transmitted historical knowledge and *ḥadīṭ* no longer had value. Even all the prophets with their acts would lose their rightness and validity, for who could establish their real identity. The consequence of this would be the refuting of all sources of any Muslim religious knowledge.

إن جاز أن يقال: إن الله تعالى يلقي شبه إنسان على إنسان آخر فهذا يفتح باب السفسطة، فإننا إذا رأينا زيدا فلعله ليس بزید، ولكنه ألقى شبه زيد عليه، وعند ذلك / لا يبقى النكاح والطلاق والملك وثوقا به، وأيضا يفضي إلى القدح في التواتر لأن خبر التواتر إنما يفيد العلم بشرط انتهائه في الآخرة إلى المحسوس، فإذا جوزنا حصول مثل هذه الشبهة في المحسوسات توجه الطعن في التواتر، وذلك يوجد القدح في جميع الشرائع، وليس لمجيب أن يجيب عنه بأن ذلك مختص بزمان الأنبياء عليهم الصلاة والسلام، لأننا نقول: لو صح ما ذكرتم فذاك إنما يعرف بالدليل والبرهان، فمن لم يعلم ذلك الدليل وذلك البرهان وجب أن لا يقع بشيء من المحسوسات ووجب أن لا يعتمد على شيء من الأخبار المتواترة، وأيضا ففي زماننا إن أسندت المعجزات فطريق الكرامات مفتوح، وحينئذ يعود الاحتمال المذكور في جميع الأزمنة: وبالجملة ففتح هذا الباب يوجب الطعن في التواتر، والطعن فيه يوجب الطعن في نبوة جميع الأنبياء عليهم الصلاة والسلام، فهذا فرع يوجب الطعن في الأصول فكان مردودا.

(„If it is possible to say that God Almighty places the semblance of one person on another, this will open the gates of sophistry. For when we see so-and-so, perhaps he is not that person; rather the semblance of that person we think we see cast on whom we really see. In this sense, matters of marriage, divorce, and possessions cannot be surely guaranteed, for this also leads to censuring recurrence, because it only enriches knowledge provided that it ultimately reaches what is perceivable in the afterlife. Thus, if such a suspicion is permitted to take place in the perceivable then recurrence will be challenged and questioned. This gives way to censuring in

all religious laws and no one is to say that this is solely related to the times of the prophets, peace be upon them. For we say: if it is true what you say, then this is what is known as proof or evidence. Therefore, he who is not aware of this proof or that evidence should not attack the perceivable and should not count on the information derived from recurrence. Moreover, in our age, if miracles are supported, then the path to wonders is wide open. Hence, the possibility known in all times: in totality, opening this door necessitates challenging recurrence as false. Challenging recurrence as false necessarily entails challenging the prophecies of all prophets as false, peace be upon them. This is a field /a branch of knowledge/ that necessitates challenging origins as false, and; thus, it has been rejected"; al-Rāzī 1990, s. 260/).

It is difficult not to acknowledge the pertinence of the logical reasoning done by al-Rāzī. The concept of substituting one individual by another is hard to defend and al-Rāzī is conscious of it. He concludes his discussion about *šubbiha* with an enigmatic sentence: "And God knows best the truth of matters" ("وألم أعلم بحقائق الأمور"; *ibidem*, s. 261). However, this is not his entire legacy regarding projecting the semblance of Jesus on another person. While he comments on verse Q 3:55, once again he undertakes the puzzling complicity of our issue. He extends his arguments, and this time he did not "escape" from the answers by saying that Allah knows everything. He accepts the challenge and searches for logical responses and conclusions. He cannot accept that the Quranic understanding of different reports might lead to many illogical contradictions. He makes six rational objections to the substitutionist conception to which he attempts to find a response:

1. He somehow repeats in the same way the aforementioned argument. If semblance of Jesus is cast upon another person thus it opens a way for delusion, for any evidence and truthful testimony to lose its credibility. Even Companions of Muḥammad could be deceived or misled and afterwards they might transmit false precepts to the believers. They could also have no confidence in their messenger because they could not be sure to whom they were talking or whom they saw. Thus the entire Islamic law, or even faith, is undermined. Al-Rāzī answers that an Omnipotent God is able to do such a miracle and project someone's semblance onto another person and it was the case of Jesus. God intervened for the sake of Jesus in a miraculous way. However, he did so only once as an exception and it should not be understood as a general rule of God's actions. That is why it did not lead to any kind of delusion or ambiguity.
2. Al-Rāzī raised a question concerning Gabriel, the angel who was sent by divine order to protect and save Jesus. Why could Gabriel not destroy his

enemies who wanted Jesus dead? He could have cast on them sickness or paralysis. The power of an angel is enough to defeat human enmity, so why did he let people pursue Jesus and almost seize him? Al-Rāzī answers that God's miracles should be a clear sign of God's intervention. It is Allah who does the action himself and he does not need the support of any human or any creature. If the angel or even Jesus had the power to defend themselves and kill enemies, it could create chaos. The miracle could be reduced to confusion and that is not acceptable by Muslim theology.

3. This argument questions why God did not raise Jesus directly to heaven without casting any semblance on another person. Why was it needed to project Jesus' appearance on somebody else, while God could directly take his prophet and easily save him? The answer is quite ambiguous and not sufficient. Al-Rāzī says that a divine ruse was an obligation for a miracle. He did not give any other explanation. We can suppose that he did not find any logical response, or out of his piety that God knows what to do, he sees it as inappropriate to question God's divine authority. However, from a scholarly point of view, such a response is rather weak and not satisfactory.
4. Why would God put people in doubt and confusion by projecting Jesus' semblance on another person? Al-Rāzī mentions this argument, which this research will further extend, but he did not attempt any deeper investigation. He replies that all Jesus's apostles were present with him and were aware of what was going on. Jesus asked his disciples openly which one of them wanted to replace him and gain heaven. That is why they could explain all that happened and erase any doubt about God's miraculous intervention. However, this answer be also classified as a weak one because we know that there were many other reports of Jesus's crucifixion where his disciples did not know about replacing Jesus with somebody else. They stayed in ignorance and were deluded just like the Jews.
5. The next argument is connected with and is quite similar to the previous one. The question is why Jesus's companions did not inform people later about what happened for real: how the angel saved their master and how somebody else was seized and crucified instead of him. Al-Rāzī answers that Christians spread a lie all over the world, saying that Jesus was dead, out of exaggerated love for him. They claim that they saw him dead on the wooden cross and recognize themselves as the only witnesses of Jesus's crucifixion. Later they transmitted their false version of facts to others. In that way the false legend has been circulated throughout the centuries. Al-Rāzī very bravely undertakes this argument which can strike a blow against

the Muslim main “tool” of the reliability of the Muslim faith: *tawātur*<sup>6</sup>, on which the whole Muslim prophetic tradition is based. Nevertheless, he finds a way to reply to two premises. The first one is that the number of eyewitnesses who were Jesus’s companions at that moment was very small; thus it was easy to have an agreement among them regarding misleading and deceiving the people. The second one is that *tawātur* is based on a very small group of people, which cannot be considered a reliable or a truthful source of knowledge, even though Christian *tawātur* of Jesus’s crucifixion is widely spread throughout the whole world (Sarrió Cucarella, 2015, s. 144–146).

6. According to tradition, the person who was crucified remained hanged on the cross for quite a long time before he died. Al-Rāzī says if that person was a man other than Jesus, he would have had enough time and opportunity to prove and convince the people that he is not him. However, this did not happen or we do not find any traces of such a transmission. However, in the end he says that the person replacing Jesus could have stayed silent about what had happened in reality.

The list of the abovementioned six points (al-Rāzī, 1935–1938, s. 71–76; Arnaldez, 1980, s. 198–202) has great value in the debate over Jesus’s crucifixion. Although al-Rāzī answers each question, one by one, his responses do not convince the reader about the pertinence of the substitutionist theory. It seems that al-Rāzī is not convinced either because he returns to al-Zamaḥṣarī’s conclusion<sup>7</sup>: the “affair” which seemed to be obscured. He goes a bit further and develops the idea. He cites Q 35:10 “Whoever desires honor (should remember) that all honor is with God. All good words ascend to Him, and all good deeds He exalts”. Afterwards he points out that if the verb *šubbiha* does not refer to a person who took the place of Jesus but refers to an “affair,” then what was taken to heaven? He concludes that it was not that Jesus or his body was elevated but that the good deeds of Jesus were sanctified and taken up to heaven. God accepted them and raised them up. Otherwise, if Jesus had been elevated physically to God, so it would mean God had to exist in some concrete, material, real place, which is unacceptable. Thus, Jesus was not taken to heaven but his deeds were raised and attested Jesus’s prophetic honor (al-Rāzī,

6 *Tawātur* – literally *recurrence*: the general knowledge in Islam (especially in the Middle Ages) which has to do with the truth that lies outside the sense of perception. The doctrine is very often presented as “recurrence imparts knowledge” i.e. what is affirmed and true is transmitted by reliable witnesses of an event. See: Weiss, 1985; Whittingham, 2008.

7 It is quite interesting that al-Rāzī never in his text mentions Zamaḥṣarī although he uses and repeats his ideas.

1935–1938, s. 72). Al-Rāzī was the first one who really threatened the traditional interpretation of Jesus’s crucifixion, but he could not agree that the understanding of the Quran can lead to confusion.

### **Who is the Author of the *šubbiha* Confusion?**

This confusion was also one of the points of debate in the famous apologetic discussion between the Caliph al-Mahdī and the Catholicos Timothy I. Their exchange of letters took place around 781 and has a great influence on the history of Christian-Muslim encounter (Putman, 1975, s. 184–185; Caspar, 1977, s. 116–117). The Caliph asked about the venerating of the cross by Christians and if God could die quoting Q 4:157 which led to the conversation about Jesus’s death and later focused especially on the confusion of *šubbiha*. Timothy posed a question highlighting the dilemma: Who is the author that takes responsibility for projecting the semblance of Jesus? Is it God or Satan? Later this question was developed by other apologists<sup>8</sup> who added another two possibilities, which are mentioned in an anonymous work *The Refutation of the One Who Denies the Crucifixion* (Swanson, 2006, s. 251), apart from God and Satan, we find Christ and Jewish leaders (tenže, 1992, s. 277). Below is a consideration of these points and an attempt to show the amount of embarrassment all these possibilities entail and how they contradict the logic of the substitutionist theory.

**God as Author of *tašbih*.** First, it is important to know who God is in the Muslim mindset, and what his main attributes, as presented by Quran, are in order to examine the following: Was Allah able to project the likeness of Jesus on somebody else or not? Is it compatible with His actions or totally against his divine nature? What aspect of Him is stressed the most? Is it the fact that He is one and absolute? (“And the God of you all is one God; there is no God but he, the Compassionate, the Merciful”; Q 2:163). Muslims always are put in the position of remembering this every day in their prayers and the proclamations of their faith. He appears as a creator of heaven, earth and all beings to whom He gives a life (“He is Allah, the Creator, the Maker, the Fashioner; His are the excellent names. All that is in the heavens and the earth magnifies Him”; Q 59:24). His creation He confides to humanity (“It is God who created the heavens and the earth, and sent down out of heaven water wherewith He brought forth fruits to be your sustenance. And He subjected to you the ships to run upon the sea at His commandment; and

8 Early Christian apologists as: Theodore Abū Qurra, Ḥabīb Abū Rā’īta, Eustathius the Monk.

He subjected to you the rivers. and He subjected to you the sun and moon constant upon their courses, and He subjected to you the night and day”; Q 14: 32-33), so people are in full gratitude to Him. It is not only gratitude because He gives us life, but also because He provides all that surrounds us, all that is made for humans’ sake. As a creator God also reveals himself as a guardian (“He said, ‘And shall I entrust him to you otherwise than as I entrusted before his brother to you? Why, God is the best guardian, and He is the most merciful of the merciful”; Q 12:64) and a protector (“Knowest thou not that to God belongs the kingdom of the heavens and the earth, and that you have none, apart from God, neither protector nor helper”; Q 2:107). Thus He alone is a sure guide (“Even so We have appointed to every Prophet an enemy among the sinners; but thy Lord suffices as a guide and as a helper”; Q 25:31) so the people must let him take control and lead them in their lives (“Upon those rest blessings and mercy from their Lord, and those-they are the truly guided”; Q 2:157), as otherwise they will go astray.

To keep people on the straight path, he constantly provides *ayāt* – signs which clearly show all that a human needs to know about God and his relation with Him (Madigan, 2006, s. 80–83). As the greatest sign God confided to humanity – a Revelation in clear Arabic language (“And indeed We know that they say, “This Qur’an is being taught by some other man”; the one they refer to speaks a foreign language, whereas this is clear Arabic”; Q 16:103) so that nobody might lose his right way –he gave the Quran to make all things clearer and understandable. Hence, no doubt enters the soul of the grateful believer who obeys God’s prescriptions and guidance (“These are the signs of the clear Book. We have sent it down as a clear discourse that you may understand”; Q 12:1-2). He never charges people with something that could overwhelm them or that they are unable to bear (“God does not burden a soul beyond capacity. Each will enjoy what (good) he earns, as indeed each will suffer from (the wrong) he does. Punish us not, O Lord, if we fail to remember or lapse into error. Burden us not, O Lord, with a burden as You did those before us. Impose not upon us a burden, O Lord, we cannot carry. Overlook our trespasses and forgive us, and have mercy upon us; You are our Lord and Master, help us against the clan of unbelievers”; Q 2:286). When one understands the totality of God’s image given by the Quran, one is struck with the question: How come God commits an act of injustice and chooses somebody else instead of Jesus to be killed, according to the substitution legends and stories? Could the most righteous condemn somebody else without any reason?

Muslim scholars searched for an answer for this dilemma of logic. The most improved attempts were given by *Muʿtazilis*<sup>9</sup>. They could not agree that God could commit such an act for any reason. It seems to them that creating an irrational confusion of identity strikes directly against the fundamentals of the Muslim image of God and their faith. Thus it was not acceptable. They tried of course in later traditions to find a solution, for example, by saying that act of substitution was an act of punishment for the person who betrayed or derided Jesus. However, it is not sufficient at all because other questions follow. How could the One God who wants to be a merciful guide for the whole of humanity and lead them through clear revelation and precepts suddenly create in history an unexplained mystery or, even we dare to say, a *divine deception*? The substitution act made by God introduces muddle and confusion to His guidance. The believers who have the good will and want to obey Him stayed unconscious of this reality throughout the ages till the time of Muḥammad. They believed throughout the centuries that Jesus was truly crucified. Why did God want to deceive humanity in this way? Is it not against His nature and His attributes listed above? How can God be the author of replacing Jesus by anybody else? “The substitutionist theory [...] makes a mockery of divine justice and the primordial covenant of God with humanity to guide human history to its final fulfillment (Q 7:172: “And remember when your Lord brought forth the generations from the backs of the Descendants of Adam, and made them their own witness; ‘Am I not your Lord?’; they all said, ‘Yes surely You are, why not? We testify’; for you may say on the Day of Resurrection that, ‘We were unaware of this’”; Q 2:38: “We said, ‘Go down from Paradise, all of you; then if some guidance comes to you from Me – so whoever follows My guidance, for such is neither fear nor any grief’ “). Would it be in consonance with God’s covenant, his mercy and justice, to deceive humanity for so many centuries?” (Ayoub, 2007, s. 166–167). Early Arab apologists equally maintained the same statement in the context of discussing the Quran’s *šubbiha lahum*.

معاذ الله أن يقال " شبه بشيء " وإنما، متى قلنا هذا، فقد وصفنا الله بتضليل عباده، وإنه يريهم خيالا لا على حقيقة، ثم يعاقبهم على ذلك من بعده

(“God forbid that it be said, ‘He made something the likeness of something else’ for if we say this we have described God as leading his servants into error and that He shows them an illusion with no basis reality and then punishes them for that afterwards!”; Monk Eustahius cited after: Swanson,1992, s. 275).

9 *Muʿtazili* is a rationalist school of thought in early Islam.

The last argument comes from the Quran itself. The *tašbīh* is not to be ascribed to God with any story known from the Quran, like, for example, God sending Aaron to be a spokesman for Moses (“Moses said: ‘O my Lord, enlarge my breast and make my mission easy. Remove the defect of my tongue that they may understand my speech. Give me as assistant from my family, Aaron my brother, to strengthen me and share my task’”; Q 20:25–32; see also Q 26:12-13; Q 28:34-35). When God sent Moses to Egypt, He did not loosen his tongue for his need to speak but rather sent him help in the person of his brother, in order to refute any charge of *tašbīh*. The point appears to be that just as God did not deliver Moses from difficulty by granting him eloquence that is not his by nature; neither did He deliver Jesus from crucifixion by granting someone or something else an appearance that is not his by nature. Thus, God cannot be the author of the *tašbīh* because He does not induce help or error by means of an illusion.

**Jesus as Author of *tašbīh*.** In the above paragraph, God’s clear stable guidance and the role of *ayāt* is one of His ways to guide humanity. Another important way of God’s is his messengers and prophets. Therefore, God sends them to people to remind them of his eternal covenant (“And remember Allah’s favour upon you and the covenant He took from you when you said, ‘We hear and we obey’ – and fear Allah; indeed Allah knows what lies within the hearts”; Q 5:7), his blessings and to surround them with great signs especially given to his creatures. In addition to these reminders, the prophets also call God’s people to faith (“The disbelievers will indeed be called out to – ‘Indeed Allah’s disgust with you is greater than your own abhorrence of yourselves, whereas you used to deny when you were called towards the faith!’”; Q 40:10), salvation (“And O my people! What is the matter with me that I call you towards salvation whereas you call me towards hell?”; Q 40:41) and guidance (“In the absence of Moses his people prepared the image of a calf from their ornaments, which gave out the mooing of a cow. Yet they did not see it could neither speak to them nor guide them to the right path. Even then they took it /for a deity/ and did wrong”; Q 7:148).

Messengers also shoulder the responsibility of interpreting and explaining to the believers the historical events connected with the relation between God and man and other *ayāt* revealed by God (Madigan, 2006, s. 84–86). The most prominent messenger and prophet sent by God in the history of humanity was Jesus. His name appears almost one hundred times in the Quran so it gives us the whole spectrum of his prophecy and the responsibility confided in him by Allah. We point out here

his most prominent features as portrayed in the Quran<sup>10</sup>. Jesus plays a unique role because he is the only human being to be called a Word of God (“And remember when the angels said, ‘O Maryam! Allah gives you glad tidings of a Word from Him, whose name is the Messiah, Jesus the son of Maryam – he will be honourable in this world and in the life to come, and among the close ones /to Allah/’”; Q 3:45). However, as other prophets, he is a servant of God created by Him (“The Christ, son of Mary, was but an apostle: all [other] apostles had passed away before him; and his mother was one who never deviated from the truth; and they both ate food [like other mortals]. Behold how clear We make these messages unto them: and then behold how perverted are their minds!”; Q 5:75) and made as an agent of divine acts through special miracles. He is the only one to whom God gave a power to heal the sick and render life to the dead (“An apostle unto the children of Israel. I have come unto you with a message from your Sustainer. I shall create for you out of clay, as it were, the shape of [your] destiny, and then breathe into it, so that it might become [your] destiny by God's leave; and I shall heal the blind and the leper, and bring the dead back to life by God's leave; and I shall let you know what you may eat and what you should store up in your houses. Behold, in all this there is indeed a message for you, if you are [truly] believers”; Q 3:39). Finally, he is strengthened by a Holy Spirit to fulfill his mission in the time of his life and during the Last Judgment (“Remember We gave Moses the Book and sent after him many an apostle; and to Jesus, son of Mary, We gave clear evidence of the truth, reinforcing him with Holy Spirit. Even so, when a messenger brought to you what did not suit your mood you turned haughty, and called some imposters and some others you slew”; Q 2:87).

In a word, the Quran portrays a very exalted composite picture of Jesus. That exalted picture provokes us to really doubt if Jesus could be the author of his own substitution. Did he ask one of his companions to take his place, and, out of fear, escape from his destiny as a coward? And when others agreed to take his place, has the power of the Holy Spirit strengthened him less than his disciples? Was it not a loss of the prophet's dignity and majesty when he asks others to replace him that he himself could be exalted? Is it not a contradiction of what the revelation reveals about him? And what is more, he is the only man the Quran mentions, together with his mother, who was not touched by sin during his miraculous birth (“And remember the woman who maintained her chastity, We therefore breathed Our Spirit into her and made her and her son a sign for the entire world”; Q 21:91, see also Q 3:42-47) and stayed free from evil's impurity later. The second question is

10 For further details on Quranic Jesus see: Robinson, *Christ in Islam and Christianity*; Fonner, „Jesus' death by crucifixion in the Qur'ān”, 436-439.

quite similar to what we saw while discussing God's authorship of the *tašbih*. How could the one who was committed to guide the people on the straight path and was sent to explain to them God's *ayāt* become the one who created such a confusion? Even more he himself was the *aya* – the sign of Allah – and finally he deluded the people?

There is another option that suggests that perhaps Jesus took part in the *divine deception* and made a complot with his Creator against people. That is not admissible and we cannot accept such logic. Prophethood in the Muslim mindset is the divine answer to human loss and confusion, God's mercy and call for all those who went astray, a clear guidance toward the Creator and an example of a perfect life in submission to divine decrees. If Jesus was an author of *tašbih* does not that indicate a false prophethood? This would make his vocation and the mission of his apostles nonsensical as understood by the Quran itself. He who by the witness of the Quran is blessed from the day of his birth, to the day of his death and the day of his resurrection ("Blessed He has made me, wherever I may be; and He has enjoined me to pray, and to give the alms, so long as I live, Peace be upon me, the day I was born, and the day I die, and the day I am raised up alive!"; Q 19:31, 33) so how could he become in his death a maker of an illusion and in his resurrection a leader into error, and, through *tašbih*, a seducer into deviation? While He was sent to walk in the footsteps of the prophets as admonition and guidance ("And We sent, following in their footsteps, Jesus son of Mary, confirming the Torah before him and We gave to him the Gospel, wherein is guidance and light, and confirming the Torah before it, as a guidance and an admonition unto the godfearing"; Q 5:46), how could he become the cause of straying from the truth? How could He, who is a sign unto men and a mercy ("He said, 'So it is; your Lord has said, This is easy for Me'; and in order that We make him a sign for mankind and a Mercy from Us; and this matter has been decreed"; Q 19:21), be similar to an illusion?

**Satan as an Author of *tašbih*.** This point (as well as the next one) seems to be the most irrational. The analysis will be based on two different positions of Satan's relation to God. Both of them are theoretically possible but not reasonable.

***Satan as an Enemy of God.*** Satan is an opponent of God and this does not need any further explanations. He is not equal to Him. He has no power over Him and His messengers. Jesus as a prophet was protected by angels, enforced and guided by the Holy Spirit. It is impossible that Satan was able to overcome God's will and become for him a master. Thus, he has no power to create and make miracles such as substitution to cause a person to be crucified in Christ's place.

**Satan as a Cooperator of God.** The “*divine deception*” might also assume the participation of Satan. His success in this deception would require Christ’s active cooperation, since he would have had to disappear at precisely the right moment and say nothing about deception to his disciples. Thus, who can he be an active member of substitution? This theory totally contradicts logic. How could the devil have a part in divine guidance of the people to salvation and play a role in the divine economy? It would mean that Satan had converted and turned to the right path, thus becoming an angel, which is not admissible and negates Muslim theology.

**Jews Leader as authors of *tašbih*.** At first this point is quite similar to the one aforementioned. The Jews who are recognized as *kuffār* – unbelievers who refused Allah and Muḥammad as their Messenger – how could they take part in divine guidance to salvation? They are rather presented as an example of misleading and religious deviation (see the Quranic context of Q 4:157) than people who could have played any part in God’s providence and fulfillment of His holy decrees. Just to them as the sons of Israel, Jesus was sent with the mission of a messenger – (“And he will be a Noble Messenger towards the Descendants of Israel saying, ‘I have come to you with a sign from your Lord, for I mould a birdlike sculpture from clay for you, and I blow into it and it instantly becomes a /living/ bird, by Allah’s command; and I heal him who was born blind, and the leper, and I revive the dead, by Allah’s command; and I tell you what you eat and what you store in your houses; undoubtedly in these /miracles/ is a great sign for you, if you are believers.’ /Several miracles bestowed to Prophet Jesus are mentioned here/”; Q 3:49 and “And remember when Jesus the son of Maryam said, ‘O Descendants of Israel! Indeed I am Allah’s Noble Messenger towards you, confirming the Book Torah which was before me, and heralding glad tidings of the Noble Messenger who will come after me – his name is Ahmed /the Praised One/’; so when Ahmed came to them with clear proofs, they said, “This is an obvious magic”; Q 61:6) – as a divine sign – *aya* – so how could they then become the ones who are *ayāt* for Jesus? Secondly the leaders of the Jews had no reason to work such a deception, since the common people would have flocked to the living Jesus after having seen him – apparently – crucified and dead. Nor would they have had the means, for how were they to find someone indistinguishable from Jesus to be crucified in his place? In fact perfect doubles are not to be found in this world.

All in all we see that none of these four possibilities are admissible. The substitutionist theory has become an illogical idea. There is no real explainable motive or cause to acknowledge that either Satan, or the Jews or even God and

Jesus are the main promoters of *divine deception*. Nevertheless, Muslim exegesis searched for a solution to explain this confusion. The principal traditional answer we find is in the Quranic verse “They devised and God devised and God is the best of devisors” (Q 3:54). It opens a way for divine cheating in the history of salvation. In a different translation, as Asad’s, we find an already injected interpretation linked to Jesus’s crucifixion: “And the unbelievers schemed [against Jesus]; but God brought their scheming to nought: for God is above all schemers”. However, the question remains: Is God obliged to resort to deception or plot? Is He not able to handle His creation in clear and sound ways? Does He need to use scheming? Does He really need to use this very wicked way to guide his people towards salvation through straight and proper ways? These questions we leave open for answer.

## ACCEPTANCE OF JESUS’ CRUCIFIXION IN ISLAM

In the last part of this essay, we would like to present an entirely different Muslim approach to the interpretation of Jesus’s crucifixion. Even though it is not widely accepted, and it has been rejected, especially by the Sunni and part of the Shīa world, we cannot omit it because of its interesting proposition about *tafsīr*, which accepts the historical report of Jesus’s death on the cross. We consider this exegesis as a “challenger” for the substitutionist theory, which, as we have just seen, is rather “limping”.

### Ismāīli Shīa Interpretation

The acceptance of the real Jesus’s crucifixion can be found in Ismāīli Islam which is one of the main important fractions of Shīa Islam. The Ismāīlis did not create their own proper books of *tafsīr* but they made a great contribution to other religious and philosophical literature. That is why we can find quite a large heritage of their writings which are full of exegesis’ commentaries and *ta’wīl*<sup>11</sup>. The first book that is worth mentioning is the work of Abū Ḥāmid al-Ġazālī who was called a great renewer of religion. In his famous *al-Radd al-Ġamīl*, he admits that Jesus was crucified in reality. The same we find in other authors such as Mu‘ayyad Šīrāzī (d.1077) or Ibn al-Rāwandī who in his *Kitāb al-zumurrudh* said that by denying Jesus’s crucifixion, the truth, reported by Christian and Jewish faiths, is lost (Massignon, 1963, s. 534). In the tenth century, many Ismāīli apologists<sup>12</sup> appeared. The main place among them is given to the Ismāīli missionary Abū Ḥātim al-Rāzī

11 Scriptural hermeneutics of interpreting Quranic text stays mostly in opposition to traditional “orthodox” *tafsīr*.

12 Muḥammad al-Nasafi (d.943), Abū Ya‘qūb Siġistāni (d.971), Ḥamīd al-Dīn al-Kirmānī, Nāširi Khusraw.

(d.925 or 935). He became famous through his debates with the physician and the philosopher Abū Bakr Muḥammad ibn Zakariyya al-Rāzī (d.925) known in medieval Europe as *Rhazes*. These two scholars were towering figures of pre-modern Islamic thought. Abū Ḥātim marshals evidence for his position not only from the Quran and *hadīths* but also from pre-Islamic Arabic poetry, as well as from Jewish and Christian Scriptures. That is why we find interpretation and controversies over Jesus's death in his works. It is preserved in the book *Alām al-Nubuwwa* (The proofs of Prophecy) where he replies to *Rhazes* that denying the crucifixion of Jesus rather creates more problems than it solves, and contradicts the unanimous reports of both Christians and Jews. What is somehow astonishing is that he did not mention in this case the concept of *tahrīf* – deviation from the original text to explain the division between Jewish, Christian and Muslim revelations. For him it is inconceivable that the understanding of divine revelation could be in conflict with an historical act.

و أما قول الملحد إن القرآن ما عليه اليهود والنصارى من قتل المسيح لأن اليهود والنصارى يقولون إن المسيح قتل وصلب.

“As for the claim of the heretic that the Quran contradicts what the Jews and Christians hold regarding the killing of Christ because both groups maintain that he was killed and crucified”; al-Razi, 2011, s. 124).

Then Abū Ḥātim states that in fact the Quran says that they did not really crucify him; however, we should not forget about the other verses in the Quran which explain that martyrs will not die, as they will remain alive forever with God. Thus, the author recognizes in Jesus's crucifixion a sort of martyrdom. He quotes two Quranic passages Q 2:154 and Q 3:169-170 as evidential proof of his logic. Jesus who died in a cause of God (was crucified) as a martyr, and thus he must be alive according to God's promises and it is his pleasure and joy to be with Him.

والقرآن ينطق بأنه لم يقتل ولم يصلب، وأن الله رفعه إليه، فإن نقول: إن الذي في القرآن هو حق وصدق، وهو مثل ضربه الله يعرف تأويله أهل علم من الأمة. ومع ذلك فقد قال بعض العلماء قولاً، ذكروا: أن معنى قوله عز وجل "و ما قتوه يقيناً: بل رفعه الله إليه" إنما عنى أنهم وإن كانوا ادعوا أنهم قتلوه، فإنه حي رفعه الله إليه، وهو عند الله محبوب مكرم مسرور، لأنه شهيد؛ والشهداء أحياء عند الله كما وصفهم الله به فقال جل ذكره: "ولا تقولوا لمن يقتل في سبيل الله أموات بل أحياء ولكن لا تشعرون" و قال في آية أخرى: "ولا تحسبن الذين قتلوا في سبيل الله أمواتاً بل أحياء عند ربهم يرزقون فرحين بما آتاهم الله من فضله ويستبشرون بالذين لم يلحقوا بهم من خلفهم ألا خوف عليهم ولا هم يحزنون" فذكر سبيل المسيح "لم يقتلوه يقيناً" أي يقتلوه على الحقيقة، لأنه شهيد رفعه الله إليه، هو حي عنده محبوب مسرور.

(“The Quran explicitly denies his death and crucifixion and asserts that God made him ascend to Him, we answer: What is in the Quran is right and truthful. It is a parable coined by God, whose true meaning is known to scholars of the community, Nevertheless, some scholars have advanced the following argument: The verse in the Quran that states: ‘Assuredly they killed him not but God raised him up to Him’, means, in fact, that even were they to assert that they killed him, he is indeed alive, having made to ascend to God, and he is with God in full glory, honor, and joy, because he is a martyr. Martyrs are alive with God, as God Himself describes them in the following verses:’ Do not say about those who are killed in the cause of God that they are dead; they are indeed alive, but you do not perceive them’; or else, ‘Do not imagine those who are killed in the path of God to be dead. Rather, they are alive with their Lord, enjoying His bounty, jubilant at what have not yet followed, to come after them. In truth, no fear shall fall upon them, nor shall they grieve’. It may there for be said that this is the case with Christ. Thus, the verse, ‘Assuredly they killed him not’, means they did not really kill him, because he is a martyr whom God has made to ascend to Him. He is thus with God, full of honor and joy”; *ibidem*).

To further emphasize his point of view, he later refers to different Gospels (Luke, Matthew, John). He quotes them to show the accordance between the Christian, Jewish and Muslim understandings of Jesus’s crucifixion and by consequence its historicity (al-Rāzī, 2011, s. 125). A very similar approach is presented by Abū Yaḳūb al-Siġistānī (d.971) who was also an Ismaīli scholar. He maintained the real Jesus’s crucifixion using typological figuration. He writes that Jesus is a sign of resurrection which reveals and unveils the hidden esoteric knowledge.

وإن الخشبة التي صلب عليه، إنما أتى بها غير قومه فصلبوه عليها مكشوفاً ظاهراً.

( “The piece of wood [cross] on which he [Jesus] was crucified, it came on him by others [people] than his ones, and those others crucified him and uncovered esoterically”; al-Siġistānī, 1961, s. 74)

He uses the cross of Jesus and his death as figures for both the hidden esoteric and the revealed clear reality. Jesus in his human body was seen as dead but in his soul he was alive. Al-Siġistānī, in his allegoric symbolism, proves the agreement between Jesus’s crucifixion and the Muslim faith. He compares *šahāda* (“There is no god but God and Muḥammad is the messenger of God”) – testimony of the Muslim faith – which is built on negation and affirmation, to the crucifixion of Jesus: his dead body hung on the cross is a negation of life, but the soul elevated to God is an affirmation. The same cross is made with two pieces of wood: one

symbolizes affirmation and one negation. Thus, Jesus's death and his cross which are the center of Christian faith simply manifest the faith of Islam and correspond with it (al-Siġistānī, 1961, s. 75–76).

### **Iḥwān al-Ṣafa' Interpretation**

Those two great Isma'ili pioneers influenced the theology of the 10<sup>th</sup> century group of Arab philosophers called *Iḥwān al-Ṣafa'* - Brethren of Purity. They were inspired by the Isma'ili Shī'a Islam though they differ from them in their understanding of some philosophical aspects, especially the salvation. They are authors of *Rasā'il* – Letters or Epistles – which contain fifty two different essays on various scientific, philosophical and religious issues (medicine, biology, metaphysics, geography, etc.). The *Rasā'il* is a kind of “Arabic Encyclopedia” of its time. It was largely read in the Muslim world and it made connections between the Quranic prophetic personalities such as Abraham, Jesus, and Joseph, and Greek philosophers such as Socrates, Pythagoras, etc. (Levonian, 1999, s. 237). Among those debates we can find a kind of summary of Jesus's life. The 3<sup>rd</sup> “Letter” concerning the sciences of the Quranic laws preserves a rapport and a commentary on Jesus's death, his crucifixion, burial and resurrection.

فلما أراد الله تعالى أن يتوفاه ويرفعه إليه اجتمع معه حواريوه في بيت المقدس في غرفة واحدة معه أصحابه وقال: إني أذهب إلى أبي وأبيكم وأنا أوصيكم بوصية قبل مفارقة لاهوتي وأخذ عليكم عهداً وميثاقاً فمن وصيتي وأو في بعهدي كان معي غداً، ومن لم يقبل وصيتي فليست منه في شيء ولا هو مني في شيء. فقالوا له: ما هي؟ قال: اذهبوا إلى ملوك الأطراف وبلغوهم مني ما ألقيت إليكم وادعوهم إلى ما دعوتكم إليه ولا تخافوهم ولا تهابوهم فإني إذا فارقت ناسوتي فإني واقف في الهواء عن يمين عرش أبي وأبيكم، وأنا معكم حيث ما ذهبتم ومؤيدكم بالنصر والتأييد بإذن أبي. اذهبوا إليهم وادعوهم بالرفق وداووهم وأمرؤا عن المنكر ما لم تقتلوا أو تصلبوا أو تنفوا من الأرض، فقالوا: ما تصديق ما تأمرنا؟ قال أنا أول من فعل ذلك. وخرج من الغد وظهر للناس وجعل يدوعهم ويعظهم حتى أخذوا حملاً إلى ملك بني إسرائيل فأمر بصلبه فصلبوا ناسوته ومرست يداه على خشبتي الصليب وبقي مصلوباً من ضحوة النهار إلى العصر، وطلب الماء فسقى الخل وطمن بالحربة ثم دفن مكان الخشبة.

(„When Almighty God wanted Christ to die and then rise to Him. Jesus with his apostles gathered in Jerusalem, in a room with his companions and told them: ‘I am going to my father and your father, I leave to you my commandment before separation of my human nature. I make a covenant and a pact with you and everyone, who accepts it, will be with me, but he, who doesn't accept it, has no relation with me and I have no relation with him. I am not his nor he is mine.’ They asked: ‘What is that?’ He answered: ‘Go to the kings of the far nations and tell them all that I have taught you and call them to the same thing to which I have called

you. Do not be afraid of them and never fear them, for when I leave my humanity, I will stand in the air of the right side of the throne of my father and your father. I will be with you wherever you go, and I will strengthen you with victory by the permission of my father. Go to them and call them with gentleness, heal them and command over evil. Do that until you killed, crucified or exiled from the land'. They said: 'What is a proof of the truth of all what you have commanded to us?'. He replied: 'I shall be the first to do so'. The next day he went out to the people and began to call them and preach to them until he was arrested by them and brought to the king of Israel's people, who condemned him to crucifixion. Then they crucified his humanity, nailed his hands to the two wooden pieces of the cross. He remained crucified from forenoon until the afternoon. He asked for water to drink but they gave him to drink a vinegar. He was pierced with a spear. Afterwards he was buried in a place near the cross"; *Rasā'il al-Iḥwān*, 1928, s. 96–97).

*Iḥwān al-Ṣafa'* did not write a typical *tafsīr*; however, they present another example of different interpretations of *tašbih*. They have no doubt about the historicity of Jesus's crucifixion and death because they distinguish between the death of the body and that of the soul. It was Jesus's humanity which was nailed to the cross while his soul was elevated by God; therefore, he lives eternally in His presence. Those three instances (Abū Ḥātim al-Rāzī, Abū Ya'qūb al-Siġistānī and *Iḥwān al-Ṣafa'*) of accepting Jesus's crucifixion allow us to extract two main conditions on which the historical acceptance of Jesus's death on the cross might be built without contradicting the Quranic revelation, and thereby negating the traditional substitutionist interpretation of *šubbiha lahum*. The first one is that Jesus's humanity and not his immortal soul was crucified; the second one is that Jesus's death must be interpreted in terms of Q 3:169 whereby Jesus died as a martyr. Thus, according to the Quran those who died in God's cause remain alive in heaven.

## CONCLUSIONS

The aim of this work is to undertake an attempt of challenging and criticizing the traditional Muslim interpretation of Jesus's crucifixion, which is a "junction" issue where three great religions – Islam, Judaism and Christianity – meet and differ. The first part of the essay has presented the only Quranic verses 4:157-158 where Jesus's crucifixion is mentioned. We decided to focus mostly on the main expression or even only one verb – *šubbiha lahum* – because of the wide range of this topic. This ambiguous term has created polemics and dilemmas among not only scholars and theologians but also among simple believers of these religions. The linguistic complexity of *šubbiha lahum* seems to be always foggy for exegetes and

translators. It is still being translated in many various ways as: “it appeared to them, the resemblance was put over another, the matter was made dubious to them”, etc. (listed it at the beginning). The linguistic lack of clarity adds much to the difficulty of its understanding.

The main commonly accepted interpretation, i.e. the traditional or orthodox, was influenced and strongly affirmed by non-Muslims, such as John of Damascus or later Timothy I. They took for granted the refutation of Jesus’s death on the cross claiming that Islam is another Docetist group spread in the Middle East. Unfortunately, it was a false understanding or rather ignorance because Docetism’s underlying purpose is contradictory to that of Islam. Thus, they cannot be combined together. Docetism wants to save the full divine nature of Jesus Christ by neglecting his human nature, unlike the Quran which shows the complete absurdity of his divinity by emphasizing his humanity. Additionally, in the Quran there are no other premises about Docetism’s influences. The neglect of these facts had irreversible effects on the interpretation of the crucifixion verse. Therefore, strong reactions were aroused in Muslim apologists to defend the basic dogma – *tawḥīd* – the uniqueness of the One God, which consequently anchored the substitutionist theory as the only acceptable one. The substitutionist theory assumes that somebody or something else was crucified instead of Jesus when He himself was saved by God’s intervention and was elevated to heaven. In the Muslim numerous reports of Jesus’s death, we could notice how they were developed by different exegeses. The substitution legends and stories can be divided in two major categories: volunteer substitution and punishment substitution. The second one, with time, gained the paramount acceptance and until today it is still the “orthodox” interpretation.

All the exegetes who undertook to explain the problem of the crucifixion agree that someone (a substitution for Jesus) was crucified, but only few of them agree who it was. However, they all unanimously agree that it was not Jesus. The revolutionary approach was discovered when the exegetes started to examine the text at a linguistic level, and they found out that the expression *šubbiha lahum* cannot refer to Jesus from a grammatical point of view at all. It opened the gate wide for a new interpretation from outside the substitutionist theory and allowed the philosophes to put obnoxious questions and demand logical explanations of *tašbih*. The research brought scholars to seriously question the credibility of the substitutionist solution, which raised two main criticisms. “Why would God make one person suffer the trials of another one, even if for the purpose of saving His messenger from the ignominy of a shameful death? Secondly, what would the implication of this confusion of identities by God be for social norms and the credibility of historical testimony?” (Ayoub, 2007, s. 160). Some critics also saw it as

a *divine deception* and a complot against humanity and believers. Some searched for an answer showing that it was not God who was the author of substitution. Nevertheless, all answers brought them to illogical results and contradictions within the substitutionist interpretation. In the 10<sup>th</sup> century, different interpretations appeared of *šubbiha lahum* from Ismaïli Islam and *Ihwān al-Šafa'*, which were consistent with both the historicity of Jesus's Crucifixion and the Quranic verse of crucifixion. They assumed that every human being was made up of two elements – the body and the soul – and that this also applies to Jesus. The use of the humanity/personal-self distinction allowed them to state that Jesus's humanity was crucified and buried, though he in his personal-self ascended to the throne of God. Thence, he remains alive, which is confirmed by Muslim theology of martyrdom based on Q 3:169. It testifies that Jesus was killed and yet he is not dead, but rather alive because he was killed in God's cause. The final question is why the substitutionist theory of the crucifixion still stands undisputed even today in the Muslim world? The reasons are not situated in historicity as one could suppose, but in theology.

What the Quran says about Jesus is related not to historicity but rather to theology. The context of the crucifixion verse explains it very well. It is not a report of the fact but a reply addressed to human arrogance towards God and his prophet. The people wanted to kill Jesus, an innocent man, who is also the Word of God and His Spirit, which is a blasphemy (see: Din, 1924, s. 28–29). Thus, the verse represents rather the theology of the Word of God – Jesus – his status and honor that each believer should respect. “The denial of his crucifixion is a denial of the power of human beings to vanquish and destroy the divine Word, which is forever victorious” (Ayoub, 2007, s. 176). Another theological aspect that concerns the problem of salvation is the acceptance of Jesus's crucifixion. Such acceptance presupposes belief in his redemptive death. Islam cannot accept that the salvation of humanity depends on one human being. Thus, it is inadmissible that Almighty God by condemning his prophet for a shameful disgusting death transmits his redemptive power into the hands of one of his messengers. Therefore, for the sake of unity of Muslim theology, Islam adopted the doubtful and incoherent theory of Jesus's substitution. The discovery of the apocryphal Gospel of Barnabas in 18<sup>th</sup> century only confirmed these doubts, and almost destroyed any earlier tentative historical interpretation.

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*The Gospel of Barnabas*. Pobrane z: <http://barnabas.net/chapters/263-215-divine-rescue-of-jesus> (215, 1216, 217)  
tanzil.net

# TRADITIONAL MUSLIM “SUBSTITUTIONIST” INTERPRETATION OF JESUS’ CRUCIFIXION: A CRITICAL PRESENTATION

## SUMMARY

The aim of this work is to undertake an attempt of challenging and criticizing the traditional Muslim interpretation of Jesus’s crucifixion. The paper analyses crucial in this respect Quranic verses 4:157-158. The ambiguous term *šubbiha lahum*, that is contains, has created polemics and dilemmas among not only scholars and theologians but also among simple believers. The orthodox interpretation refutes Jesus’s death on the cross. The substitutionist theory assumes that somebody or something else was crucified instead of Jesus when He himself was saved by God’s intervention and was elevated to heaven. The revolutionary approach was discovered when the exegetes started to examine the text at a linguistic level, and they found out that the expression *šubbiha lahum* cannot refer to Jesus from a grammatical point of view at all. The use of the humanity/personal-self distinction allowed under this interpretation to state that Jesus’s humanity was crucified and buried, though he in his personal-self ascended to the throne of God. The paper concludes that for the sake of unity of Muslim theology, Islam adopted the doubtful and incoherent theory of Jesus’s substitution. The acceptance of Jesus’s crucifixion presupposes belief in his redemptive death. Islam cannot accept that the salvation of humanity depends on one human being.