

**The Crucifixion and the Qur'an: A Study in the History of Muslim Thought.**  
By Todd Lawson. Oxford: One World Publications, 2009. Pp. 180. £50.00.

This fascinating work is the product of many years of scholarship. It offers an extended study of the Islamic accounts of the crucifixion which feature in early, classical and modern exegetical literature. The basic thrust of the argument developed in this book posits that while the Qur'an's reference to the crucifixion has typically been interpreted as fostering an explicit rejection of the belief that Christ was crucified, in actual fact, its mention of this issue constitutes neither a denial nor an affirmation of its historicity. Accentuating the neutrality of the Qur'an's position, it is suggested that over successive centuries the discussion of the crucifixion within the Islamic tradition was proportionately evolved to accommodate the doctrine of denial in a way which obscured the neutrality of the original Qur'anic position.

The two ayas of the Qur'an in which the crucifixion is fleetingly mentioned state: *and their saying, 'We have killed the Messiah Jesus the son of Mary' the messenger of God. They did not kill him nor did they crucify him, rather, it only appeared so to them; in reality, those who differ about him clearly are in doubt concerning the [matter]: they have no knowledge of this save their conjecture. Certainly, he was not killed; but rather he was raised by God to Him; God is mighty and wise (Q. 4:157–8).* Todd Lawson explains that the hermeneutic culture out of which the doctrine of denial emerged was shaped by a complex array of dogmatic exigencies and that the distinction between scripture and its interpretation tends to be inappropriately overlooked by those who speak of the Qur'an denying the crucifixion. To highlight this thought Lawson comments that the issue remained a subject of vigorous debate among classical and later Muslim scholars and that references to the crucifixion as preserved in early and medieval literature furnished distinctly divergent accounts of its unfolding. Unravelling the key historical features of the associated discussions and debates over these two ayas and their treatment in medieval and modern literature forms the principal focus of this book.

Interestingly, having stressed his view that the Qur'an itself offers a neutral account of the crucifixion, Lawson uses the introduction to this work to state that the doctrine of denial was by no means unprecedented and had parallels within expressions of Docetism, a Gnostic heretical movement which has its origins in the late first century AD, teaching that Christ's suffering on the cross was only apparent. Within the confines of such teachings 'what was seen crucified on the cross was just an image: a phantom, not the real Jesus or perhaps even a substitute' (p. 3 and cf. pp. 144–5). Lawson proposes that the early exegetes' explanation of the Qur'anic reference to the crucifixion is easily reconciled with Docetic accounts in which the individual crucified was incorrectly believed to be Jesus and that 'in reality it was another person

altogether, one upon whom the image of Jesus had been miraculously cast or one who was mistakenly thought to be Jesus'. The implication is that the Qur'an itself can be 'read perfectly in line with the early and apparently widespread Christian perspective'. However, it is important to bear in mind that in contradistinction to the general theological position taken by the Qur'an with respect to the nature of Christ, Docetists accentuated his absolute divinity, denying his human qualities. They adopted the view that Christ was pure spirit: for them 'it was inconceivable that the divine Christ could have come "in the flesh"'.<sup>1</sup> It was this rationale which necessitated their rejection of the belief that in reality he had suffered or died on the cross; while, on the contrary, the Qur'anic position shares no affinities with such a view of Christ, and therefore its reference to the crucifixion appears to proceed from an entirely unrelated premise, one seemingly informed by different concerns; the Qur'an's narrative yields no ground to the link between the event of the crucifixion and its implied redemptive import. Lawson does add that the earliest non-Qur'anic textual evidence which highlights the Islamic denial of the crucifixion was provided not by Muslim sources but by a text attributed to the church father John of Damascus (d. 131–2/749).<sup>2</sup> He contends that this influential figure may have pursued a polemical explanation of the aya on the crucifixion which deliberately put emphasis on the aspect of denial, thereby placing Islamic doctrine on the subject alongside the discredited heretical teachings of Docetism. One claim is that such a reading of the aya may have influenced early Muslim commentators who adopted the substitution theory; namely, the idea that a substitute was crucified in Christ's place. Lawson objects that such an interpretation of the aya is unjustifiable, for the Qur'an states only that the Jews did not crucify Jesus, which is 'different from saying that Jesus was not crucified' (p. 12 and pp. 26–7). Intriguingly, that Muslim exegetes would want to pursue the theme of denial is explained in terms of a 'communal desideratum to show just how distinctive, in a sectarian milieu, this new religion was'; additionally, the suggestion is that the materials which allowed such glosses to prevail were derived from non-Qur'anic sources, although one could argue that the distinctiveness of the new faith was already secured by virtue of its rapid spread and the brand of theology it espoused, especially with regards to Jesus (p. 20). Lawson refers to the attitude on this issue adopted by Morris Seale, who concluded that the Qur'an simply does not say enough on the subject to either confirm or deny the event, adding that this stance 'is the one that comes closest to the position represented in this study'.

The introduction also mentions that much of the material which features in this text was first analysed over 20 years ago in Lawson's two-part article entitled 'The Crucifixion of Jesus in the Qur'an and Qur'anic Commentary: A Historical Survey' and that many of the findings in this current work 'overlap or dovetail with' his earlier research on the subject; it is also noted that it complements the work of scholars such as Neal Robinson and Heribert Busse, who were both authors of important studies on

the subject of Christ in Islam and the crucifixion.<sup>3</sup> However, in this monograph Lawson has translated and reviewed much of the associated commentary material, presenting it chronologically; additionally, the writings of leading Ismā'īlī authors on the subject of the crucifixion are explored and assessed for their contribution to the field.

The volume includes a foreword written by Sidney Griffith, who speaks of the 'wide and wonderful range of theological thinking about Jesus' which exists within Islamic thought, adding that Todd Lawson's work has managed to locate the discussion of the crucifixion within the boundaries of this rich thinking (p. xi). In the first chapter Lawson sets about isolating the specific context which informs the reference to the crucifixion on the basis that 'a text is a discrete entity and provides its own context for understanding its contents' (p. 26). With this key axiom in mind, it is hypothesised that the underlying theme of the set of ayas in which the reference to the crucifixion verse is situated relates specifically to the condemnation of disbelief (*kufḥ*) and has little bearing on the discussion of the historicity of the crucifixion. Added to this is his proviso that the chapter 'does not have any aspect of Christian belief or doctrine as its theme or purpose' (p. 27). Even when poring over the semantic import of the vocabulary employed in the ayas in question, Lawson takes the view that, in general, the Qur'an's discussion of Jesus can be understood as countenancing the idea that he can die a 'normal biological death' (p. 30). In his view this last point would add weight to the suggestion that the ayas themselves are not necessarily concerned with the denial of death or fatality in respect of Jesus. Fascinatingly, it is argued that the *hapax legomenon* which features in the aya: namely, *shubbiha lahum* (*it only appeared so to them*), 'neither supports nor rejects the substitution of another human being for Jesus in this context'. This is despite the fact that the fleshing out of the construct of substitution with reference to this key phrase was pursued with vigour in the works of early and classical exegetes. Lawson would argue that the concerted focus on the substitution narrative reflected a subsequent development and that exegetes were intently pursuing explanations which went well beyond the semantic compass of the ayas circumscribed by the Qur'an. With regards to the second aya, Q. 3:158, *certainly, he was not killed; but rather he was raised by God to Him; God is both mighty and wise*, classical exegetes tended to take the view that it served as an emphatic complement to the predicate of the preceding aya, confirming evidently that Jesus was neither crucified nor killed. However, Lawson advances the argument that when compared to other Qur'anic concepts, terminologies and stylistic conventions, its vocabulary can be shown to betray meanings which militate against such an interpretation, reckoning that if this were appreciated within the broader contours of the Qur'anic concept of death, the fatality or murder of those favoured by God, especially when faced with adversity, torment, or even rejection, it is by no means problematic and that its spiritual value remains fittingly potent.<sup>4</sup>

The second chapter summarises the exegetical references to the crucifixion found in the literature of pre-Ṭabarī *tafsīr*. It begins by referring to the division of *tafsīr* into two basic categories of *tafsīr bi'l-ma'thūr* and *tafsīr bi'l-ra'y* with the former being governed by a traditional hierarchy of scriptural sources and the latter allowing the resort to a greater measure of personal opinion and judgement in matters of exegesis.<sup>5</sup> Restricting himself to the former class of materials, Lawson identifies the emergence of a consensus of opinion among commentators regarding the view that a crucifixion had taken place, but that few exegetes had agreed about the precise identity of the victim, although they accepted that it was not Jesus (p. 47).<sup>6</sup> Notably, it is striking that in Lawson's assessment by far the most popular versions of the substitution legend were related on the authority of Wahb b. Munabbih (d. 114/732) and that 'it is somewhat ironic that the most influential traditions denying that Jesus was crucified are traced to his authority' (p. 50). Lawson indicates that the renowned commentator al-Ṭabarī actually endorsed one of the forms of the substitution legend ascribed to Wahb as providing the best explanation of Q. 4:157, while a second account of the substitution story was considered by this seminal commentator to be just as relevant; al-Ṭabarī's influence was huge. The inference here is that despite Wahb's poor reputation amongst some traditionists of a stern disposition, the appeal of the exegetical versions of the crucifixion associated with him might be linked to his importance to classical exegetes as a source for the exposition of Biblical materials. Added to this is the fact that the substitution stories promulgated by him had an edifying function; moreover, they were subtly choreographed to fit the linguistic setting of the ayas in question. It is argued that such interpretations were to exert 'enormous influence in the formation of Islamic Christology'. Lawson's survey of exegetical works from the first three centuries of the Islamic tradition makes the point that the sources adduced to support such explanations, particularly the materials on the substitution theory and the denial of the crucifixion, were originally of a non-Islamic provenance.

Seminal exegetical texts from classical and medieval periods are the focus of the third chapter, and in this Lawson argues that although many of these works included references to the substitution dicta in their treatment of the crucifixion, other seemingly exceptional explanations were being countenanced. Thus, for example, not only are there noteworthy developments regarding al-Ṭabarī's treatment of the issue, but it is also the case that some scholars were inclined to venture more controversial opinions, such as al-Qāsim b. Ibrāhīm al-Rassī (d. 246/860), the influential Zaydī luminary, who was prepared to uphold the 'historicity of the crucifixion of Jesus' (p. 77).<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, it is claimed that even al-Ghazālī, in a treatise whose ascription is hotly disputed, *al-Radd al-jamīl*, is said to have affirmed its historicity. Lawson contends that there is no reason to doubt the authenticity of the ascription of this text to al-Ghazālī. Referring to views propounded by Louis Massignon, Lawson reasons

that al-Ghazālī was possibly persuaded by the views on the subject of the crucifixion expressed by leading Ismāʿīlī intellectuals such as Abū Ḥātim al-Rāzī (d. 322/933–4) and Nāṣir-i Khusraw (d. c. 471/1078), who affirmed the reality of the crucifixion. Even the anonymous Ikhwān al-Ṣafāʾ accepted its historicity.<sup>8</sup> However, it should be said that perhaps a much more reliable indicator of al-Ghazālī's position on the crucifixion is provided in his *Mustaṣfāʾ fī ʿilm al-uṣūl*, in a section of the work dealing with the concept of *tawātur* ('broad authentication') and its legal authority.<sup>9</sup> Al-Ghazālī states the following: 'regarding the killing of Jesus, peace be upon him, they indeed spoke truthfully in that they had seen an individual who resembled Jesus, peace be upon him, having been killed; however, it [only] appeared so to them'.<sup>10</sup> Previously in this same work, al-Ghazālī deals with the issue of whether by virtue of the concept of *tawātur* Christians should be believed concerning their account of the doctrine of the Trinity and the concatenation of events surrounding the crucifixion; so it is evident that his position on the issue appears rather 'conformist' as far as denying the crucifixion is concerned. Lawson does ponder the question as to what occurred between the historical periods separating the great Sunnī exegete al-Ṭabarī and the death of al-Ghazālī to 'cause such a startling reversal' in the way the crucifixion verses were understood and interpreted (p. 78). Of course, it should be stated here that the historical periods proposed by Lawson are slightly arbitrary and that, despite the impressive range of exegetical works referred to between these periods, there are discussions on the subject of the crucifixion which feature in non-exegetical literature and this material would impinge upon the idea of there being some sort of a reversal or change in attitudes with regards to views on the crucifixion within Islamic scholarship. For example, the standard theological *summae* authored within the Ashʿarī school reveal that a denial of the crucifixion remained axiomatic among luminaries of that school. Al-Ghazālī's mentor, al-Juwaynī (d. 478/1085), actually devotes part of a section of his *Kitāb al-shāmil fī uṣūl al-dīn* to its denial.<sup>11</sup> Still, Lawson's position is that in the post-Ṭabarī period a much greater variety of understanding on the subject emerged, although this apparently came to an end in the eighth/fourteenth century; and that the need to absolve the Christians from spreading false stories also played a role in the evolution of ideas. Significantly, Lawson notes that in Twelver Shīʿī commentaries the denial of the crucifixion is upheld, and that Massignon made the telling claim that the substitute legend in Islamic exegesis probably had its origins in a Shīʿī milieu as it fits in exactly with the doctrine of a Hidden Imām who resides in the unseen realm, although it is recognised that the idea of substitution was adopted quite early by Sunnī exegetes (p. 88). Other classical and medieval compilations of *tafsīr* examined in this chapter include the works of scholars such as Jaʿfar b. Maṣṣūr al-Yaman (d. c. 349/960), Abū Yaʿqūb al-Sijistānī (d. 360/971), ʿAbd al-Jabbār (d. 416/1025), al-Thaʿlabī (d. 427/1035), al-Ṭūsī (d. 460/1067), Abū'l-Futūḥ al-Rāzī (d. 525/1131), al-Ṭabrīsī (d. c. 548–53/1153–8), al-Qushayrī (d. 465/1072), al-Zamakhsharī (d. 538/1144), al-Bayḍāwī (d. 685/1286), al-Rāzī (d. 606/1209), Rūzbihān al-Baqlī

(d. 606/1209), Ibn Kathīr (d. 744/1373) and al-Suyūṭī (d. 911/1505). The overriding impression is that in most of these works there was a subtle attempt on the part of exegetes to eschew extra-Islamic substitution materials when broaching treatments of Q. 4:157–8, and, in some instances, they were inclined to pursue syntheses of the crucifixion verses which were more philosophically inspired. According to Lawson, this very development predicated that distinct variations in approaches to the exegesis of these ayas were positively advocated.

Modern developments in relation to the exegesis of Q. 4:157–8 are reviewed in the final chapter of this book. Lawson remarks that it is evident in these works that the denial of the crucifixion was reinvigorated, albeit through a variegated range of approaches. Thus the exegetical work of al-Kāshānī (d. 1091/1680), attempted to champion a 'rapprochement' between the different strands of Shī'ī explanations of these ayas, and one that was delicately informed by a new cosmology and ontology inspired by the works of Avicenna (d. 428/1037), al-Suhrawardī (d. 587/1191) and Ibn ʿArabī (d. 638/1240). Other scholars, such as the illustrious commentator al-Ālūsī (d. 1270/1854), are said to have favoured a much firmer endorsement of the substitution accounts, selectively poring over the materials of his predecessors, while at the same time eschewing those views he deemed dissenting. Similarly, a shift to a categorical denial of the crucifixion is discerned in the work of later scholars such as Rashīd Riḍā (1865–1935), who continued the famous *Tafsīr al-Manār* begun by Muḥammad ʿAbduh (1849–1905), and was now drawing from the spurious 'Gospel of Barnabas' to develop his exegesis of the aya. The point also made in respect of works authored in the modern period is that lesser importance was attached to the utility of the available traditions in resolving the denial narrative and that the appeal to logical arguments is likewise manifest in the later literature.<sup>12</sup> However, as Lawson remonstrates, a cause of greater consternation to these writers was not simply the separate issue of the historicity of the crucifixion, which he believes could be accepted, but rather its soteriological implications, although he adds that for some exegetes what was at stake in the discussions of the crucifixion of Christ was the Islamic concept of prophecy.

From the Christological perspective, at the heart of the crucifixion narrative is the doctrine of its redemptive and soteriological import; in contrast, as Lawson explains, throughout the Qur'an when salvation is mentioned it is intimately tied 'to deeds and behaviour' and he admits in his introduction that 'the redemptive value of the death of Jesus on the cross represents an alternative view that may have had little audience among the early followers of the Prophet Muhammad (p. 20)'. It is evident that this doctrine of redemption can hardly be substantiated through reference to the Qur'anic teachings on Jesus. Other scholars have bemoaned the fact that the Qur'an does not touch upon the subject of the redemptive importance and meaning of the crucifixion.<sup>13</sup> However, it is possible to argue that there exists 'internal' evidence to suggest not

only that the *ayas* of Q. 4:157–8 constitute an unambiguous denial of the crucifixion, but also that its discussion was aimed at undermining the construct of redemption.<sup>14</sup> If one were to build on the premise that ‘a text is a discrete entity and provides its own context for understanding its contents’, then the denial of the crucifixion appears as an inevitable corollary to the theological positions that the text of the Qur’an takes on the status of Christ: the Qur’anic viewpoint vis-à-vis Jesus is defined by unequivocally definitive statements confirming his utterly human nature in terms of both his creation and his relationship with the divine. The theological sensitivities and nuances of the issues at stake are perhaps best illustrated through a very brief but pertinent reference to the famous Arian controversy of the fourth century AD within the church. Tensions among theologians concerning the delicate issue of defining the relationship of the Son to the Father had dominated this century.<sup>15</sup> Arius (d. 336 AD), a presbyter, had argued that the Son belonged to the created order, robustly advocating the argument that he was neither eternal nor co-substantial with the Father; as one of his famous maxims states: ‘there was [a time] when he was not’.<sup>16</sup> In a further relevant passage Arius declares, ‘[t]he Son who is tempted, suffers, and dies, however exalted he may be, is not to be equal to the immutable father beyond pain and death: if he is other than the father, he is inferior’.<sup>17</sup> The critique of Arius’ theological views by individuals such as Bishop Alexander (d. 328 AD) and Athanasius (d. 373 AD) centred on drawing attention to the Christological and soteriological repercussions of his teachings. Emphasising the point that the doctrine of redemption ultimately turns on the incarnation, death and resurrection of the Son, Athanasius advanced the argument that ‘only if the one who became fully human in the incarnation was fully divine could salvation be effected’.<sup>18</sup> If one were to place the same range of theological concerns and arguments within the vector of the Qur’an’s teachings on Jesus, it becomes evident that the emphatic refutation of the divinity of Christ as set out in the Qur’an presents an implicit challenge to the structural edifice of the doctrine of redemption, providing the aspect of denial in the *ayas* with greater definition.<sup>19</sup> Within this context, the Qur’an’s reference to the crucifixion narrative would appear to be deliberately designed to complement its theological teachings on Christ. It is the aspect of denial in the Qur’an’s narrative of the crucifixion which sustains this arrangement, fitting in contextually as well as logically with the linguistic configuration of the *ayas*. The nascent community of Muslims must have been aware of the polemical and doctrinal nuances inherent in the crucifixion verses, especially when broached against the backdrop of the Qur’an’s broader theological discourse on the status of Christ and his mission.<sup>20</sup> The denouement of this is the striking resourcefulness and enthusiasm with which the explication of the substitution narrative proceeded in the early and medieval exegetical literature: had the neutrality of the *ayas* been incontrovertible, one wonders whether such exegetical pursuits of the denial narrative would have flourished.<sup>21</sup> That they did provides testimony to the view that within the early Islamic tradition the Qur’an’s denial of the crucifixion was

unambiguously accepted, forming the basis for later exegetes' treatment of the episode. Elsewhere, it has been argued from at least the late seventh century AD that Christians were mindful that Muslims were denying the crucifixion. Indeed, Mark Swanson, citing the 'Life of Shenoute', a text he describes as presenting an historical apocalypse in which the Children of Ishmael are referred to as 'those who deny my suffering, which I accepted on the cross', has dated the text to circa 690 AD; Swanson also notes that others have suggested an even earlier date for this text.<sup>22</sup> This represents a further indication of the historical depth of the denial narrative.

One can certainly admire the clarity and rigour with which Lawson eloquently presents his arguments and authoritatively marshals the sources, especially given the gamut of materials consulted in this work. The detailed manner by which these sources are introduced and examined within the broader discussion of the crucifixion in Islamic thought makes the book an absorbing read and an importance reference point for material on this subject. Particularly informative is Lawson's thorough treatment of the historical development of the exegetical materials on the substitution theory, as it reveals the fascinating extent to which this was adapted and fleshed out in the different *tafāsīr*. His engaging analysis of both the primary and secondary sources in this regard is achieved with a concern for both highlighting the exegetical intricacies of the issues at stake and the contextualisation of the wider implications of the discussions. In his introduction Lawson has commented that his book is indebted to the works of scholars such as Earl Elder, Geoffrey Parrinder and Montgomery Watt, all of whom have earnestly tried 'to defuse the controversy' surrounding the Qur'anic portrayal of the crucifixion. His own book must be considered a valuable contribution to this legacy, and while he then moves on to state that no single writer has succeeded in emphasising sufficiently not only the neutrality of the Qur'an on the subject of the crucifixion, but also the great variety of Muslim understandings of the aya in question, his input to this endeavour is unquestionably substantial. Be that as it may, whether he has succeeded in demonstrating the Qur'an's neutrality on the subject of the crucifixion remains contestable as the issue seemingly turns on how one treats these ayas in light of the Qur'an's broader theological teachings on Jesus. The debate about the semantic import of these verses is likely to continue.

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#### NOTES

1 Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church* (London: Penguin, 1993), pp. 37–8; cf. Michael D. Goulder, 'Ignatius' "Docetists"', *Vigiliae Christianae* 53:1 (1999), pp. 16–30; Christoph Marksches, *Gnosis: An Introduction* (London and New York: T&T Clark, 2003); Gedaliahu G. Stroumsa, 'The Gnostic Temptation', *Numen* 27:2 (1980), pp. 278–86; the general Gnostic label tends to conceal a veritable variety in terms of attitudes and doctrines which adherents to

forms of Gnosticism embraced. See also Geoffrey Parrinder, *Jesus in the Qur'an* (London: Faber and Faber, 1965), pp. 119–21. Lawson also mentions an important study on Docetism by Ronnie Goldstein and Guy Stroumsa entitled ‘The Greek and Jewish Origins of Docetism: A New Proposal’, *Zeitschrift für Antikes Christentum* 10:3 (2007), pp. 423–41; see Lawson’s discussion on p. 2 in the footnote. Marcion of Sinope (85–164 AD) is associated with the view that the divine being was not born of a woman; he likewise rejected the accounts of the childhood of Christ, but accepted that the cross had redemptive importance (Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church*, p. 39 and pp. 80–1). Conversely, in one form of Monarchianism, defined as adoptionism, Paul of Samosata (260–72 AD) had spoken of Christ being born human but asserted that the *logos* entered him following his baptism; another form (modalism) taught that the Trinity was real but represented three separate aspects of the divine. Chadwick explains that ‘according to this view Father, Son, and Spirit are modes of the same being, perhaps temporary and successive roles adopted for the purpose of the divine plan of redemption, but in no way corresponding to anything in the ultimate nature of the Godhead’ (Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church*, p. 87). He adds that in the West it was referred to as ‘Patripassianism’ (the doctrine that the father suffers).

2 Some scholars have identified earlier sources which indicate this belief was widely held much earlier: see note 22 below.

3 Todd Lawson, ‘The Crucifixion of Jesus in the Qur’an and Qur’anic Commentary: A Historical Survey’, *Bulletin of Henri Martyn Institute of Islamic Studies* 10:2 (1991), pp. 43–62 and 10:3 (1991), pp. 6–40. Robinson’s book, *Christ in Islam and Christianity: The Representation of Jesus in the Qur’an and the Classical Muslim Commentaries* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991) was published in the same year (and see pp. 108–9), while Busse’s work appeared in 2001. Cf. Robinson, *Christ in Islam and Christianity*, pp. 108–9; and also Neal Robinson’s respective entries on ‘Crucifixion’ and ‘Jesus’ in the *Encyclopaedia of the Qur’an*.

4 One might tentatively question whether this last argument is pertinent in that it potentially presents something of a quandary as far as the semantic thrust of the aya is concerned: firstly, Lawson has insisted that the Qur’an takes a neutral position on the issue of the crucifixion and that a neutral appreciation of the ayas was most likely in vogue within the early Islamic tradition; secondly, he maintains that the Qur’an offers nothing explicit about the salvific import of the crucifixion. However, when one considers the tone of emphasis and defiance which these two ayas evoke, it would appear to be somewhat paradoxical for the Qur’an to assert unequivocally that the Jews did not kill Jesus, only to somehow intimate a neutral position regarding his suffering crucifixion, especially as the ayas are initially referring to his being spared from such a fate or ordeal. For in Q. 4:157 it is peremptorily declared that the Jews neither crucified nor killed Jesus but that *it appeared so to them and that those who differ about him clearly are in doubt concerning the [matter]: they have no knowledge of this save their conjecture*. The ensuing aya, Q. 4:158, then goes on to exclaim that with certitude he was not killed but elevated or raised to God’s realm. It would seem that the theme of denial suits the contextual parameters provided by these ayas; and was understood accordingly. Therefore the argument about the fatality or murder of those favoured by God being applicable to Jesus does appear to be questionable within the context of the Qur’anic presentation of the crucifixion of Jesus, although it should be acknowledged here that Lawson has stated earlier that the crucifixion verses relate specifically to the condemnation of disbelief (*kufūr*). The argument is that later exegetes, for a range of reasons, adopted the denial narrative thereby engendering the exegetical discourse germane to the theme of substitution.

5 Interestingly, although this division is referred to in the later sources, it is somewhat academic in that it was not consciously adhered to by early exegetes or even axiomatically defined in the earliest *tafāsīr*. It does represent a desideratum as far as later scholarship is concerned. Among

the early grammarians, al-Aṣma'ī (d. 213/828) and Abū 'Ubayda (d. 210/825) are reported to have clashed on the subject of applying *ra'y* to the exegesis of scripture. The traditional sources state that such was the religiosity of al-Aṣma'ī that he refrained from explaining in any way a word or phrase of the Qur'an, castigating Abū 'Ubayda for his having adopted an untrammelled explication of the sacred text. Al-Aṣma'ī derided Abū 'Ubayda's *Majāz al-Qur'ān*, as did figures such as Abū Ḥātim al-Sijistānī (d. 255/869), who exclaimed that no one should be permitted to author works of this nature; his Kufan contemporary al-Farrā' (d. 207/822) even declared that had Abū 'Ubayda been brought before him, he would have given him 20 strokes because of this work. See Muḥammad b. al-Ḥasan al-Zubaydī, *Ṭabaqāt al-naḥwiyyīn*, ed. Muḥammad Abū'l-Faḍl Ibrāhīm (Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, 1973), pp. 175–6; Ma'ar b. al-Muthannā Abū 'Ubayda, *Majāz al-Qur'ān*, ed. Fu'at Sezgin, 2nd edn (2 vols, Beirut: Mu'assasat al-Risāla, 1981). As Lothar Kopf remarked, strangely, al-Aṣma'ī is credited with being the author of a *gharīb al-Qur'ān* work: Lothar Kopf, 'Religious Influences on Medieval Arabic Philology', *Studia Islamica* 5 (1956) pp. 33–59, at pp. 35–6. For more on categories of *tafsīr*, see the *Muqaddima fī 'ilm al-tafsīr* in Aḥmad b. 'Abd al-Ḥalīm b. Taymiyya, *Majmū' fatāwā shaykh al-Islam*, ed. 'Abd al-Raḥmān b. Muḥammad b. Qāsim (30 vols, Riyadh: King Muḥammad b. Sa'ūd University, 1381–4/1961–4), vol. 13, pp. 344–75.

6 Lawson observes that all of the commentaries, with the exception of the dubious pseudo-Ja'far al-Ṣādiq (d. 148/765) text, which vaguely entertains the notion of crucifixion, albeit ambiguously, accept that Jesus was not crucified. One parallel which is worth considering here relates to the *ayas* designated as *mutashābihāt* and specifically those comprising the *ḥurūf al-muqatta'a*; later scholars were acutely aware that liturgically the letters were intrinsic components of the text but had to resort to conjecture when trying to explain and propound views regarding their precise meaning and significance.

7 For a study of the issue of possible Christian influences on this figure, see Wilferd Madelung, 'Al-Qāsim Ibn Ibrāhīm and Christian Theology', *ARAM* 3:1 and 3:2 (1991), pp. 35–44. Note that this is discussed with reference to Tobias Mayer (Ali Musa) 'A Muslim Speaks to Christians', *Priests and People: Pastoral Theology for the Modern World* (2003), pp. 9–13. And the suggestion is that there is 'no compelling reason to doubt that he (al-Rassī) understood the Qur'an as not denying that the historical Jesus was actually put on the cross and crucified' (p. 77 and see p. 150, where there is a reference to Mayer's suggestion that al-Qāsim b. Ibrāhīm 'accepted the crucifixion at face value'. The wider implications of this for Zaydi theology and indeed the underlying rationale of al-Rassī's position are not touched upon in Mayer's piece.

8 Ikhwān al-Ṣafā', *Rasā'il ikhwān al-ṣafā' wa-khullān al-wafā'* ('The Philosophical Treatises of the Ikhwān al-Ṣafā') (8 vols, Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1957). See also Ian Netton, *Muslim Neoplatonists: An Introduction to the Thought of the Brethren of Purity (Ikhwan al-Ṣafā')* (New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2002), pp. 53–77, and especially pp. 58–60; Netton refers to there being a Nestorian emphasis which was reflected in their views on Christ's humanity (*nāsūt*). He also speaks of there being contradictions regarding some of their expressed views on Christianity (p. 61).

9 In respect of *tawātur*, classical *ḥadīth* literature adheres to the following schema: those reports which were adduced through multiple chains of transmission to the extent that precluded the possibility of their being the product of deliberate forgery were referred to as *mutawātir*, although this was effectively referenced to the levels of transmission across the various nodes or junctures within given *asānid*; likewise, those with lesser degrees of frequency across the various nodes of their supporting *asānid* were called the *āḥād* and divided into *mashhūr*, *'azīz* and *gharīb* categories, see al-Suyūfī, *Tadrīb al-rāwī fī sharḥ taqrīb al-Nawawī*, ed. 'Abd al-Wahhāb 'Abd al-Laṭīf (2 parts in 1, Cairo: Dār al-Turāth, 1972), pp. 179–3; al-Khaṭīb al-Baghādādī, Abū Bakr Aḥmad b. 'Alī, *Kitāb al-kifāya fī 'ilm al-riwāya* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 1998), pp. 16–19; Zayn al-Dīn al-'Irāqī, *Fath al-mughith sharḥ alfiyyat al-ḥadīth*,

ed. Ṣalāh °Uwīḍa (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-°Ilmiyya, 1993), pp. 307–15. See also Bernard Weiss, ‘Knowledge of the Past: The Theory of *tawātur* According to Ghazālī’, *Studia Islamica* 61 (1985), pp. 81–105.

10 Al-Ghazālī, Abū Ḥāmid, *Mustaṣfā fī °ilm al-uṣūl* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-°Ilmiyya, 1993), p. 111. Al-Ghazālī makes the point that on a topic such as the doctrine of The Trinity, although reports regarding the doctrine are passed on by virtue of *tawātur*, they are not initially established via the process of *tawqīf* and *samā°*: namely, via authenticated scriptural authority and proof.

11 Al-Juwaynī, °Abd al-Malik b. °Abd Allāh, *al-Shāmil fī uṣūl al-dīn*, ed. Sami al-Nashshār, Fayṣal Budayr °Awn, Suhayr Muḥammad Mukhtār (Alexandria: Munsha°at al-Ma°ārif, 1969), pp. 606–7. See also Ibn Taymiyya, *al-Jawāb al-ṣaḥīḥ li-man baddala dīn al-Masīḥ* (6 vols, Riyadh: Maṭba°at Majd al-Tijāriyya, n.d). Other classical texts which focus on the discussion of Christian dogma include the set of epistles of the Andalusian scholar Abū °Abīda al-Khazrajī (d. 582/1187), *Bayn al-Islām wa°l-Masīḥiyya* (ed. M. Shāmma (Cairo: Maktabat Wahba, 1972), see pp. 158–75 on the crucifixion). For discussions of *tawātir* see Martin Whittingham, ‘How Could so Many Christians be Wrong? The Role of *Mutawātir* (Recurrent Transmission of Reports) in Understanding Muslim Views of the Crucifixion’, *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 19:2 (2008), pp. 167–78; David Thomas, ‘Christian Theologians and New Questions’, pp. 257–76. Cf. David Thomas ‘Early Muslim Responses to Christianity’ in David Thomas (ed.), *Christians at the Heart of Islamic Rule: Church Life and Scholarship in °Abbasid Iraq* (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2003), pp. 231–54 and also, David Thomas, *Christian Doctrines in Islamic Theology* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2008); Oddbjørn Leirvik, *Images of Jesus Christ in Islam* (London and New York: Continuum, 2010).

12 Interestingly, even the twentieth-century scholar Muḥammad Abū Zahra, the one time rector of al-Azhar, cited Q. 4:157–8 in conjunction with references to the spurious Gospel of Barnabas to consolidate the argument that Jesus was not crucified. See Muḥammad Abū Zahra, *Muḥāḍarāt fī°l-Naṣrāniyya* (Cairo: Dār al-Fikr, n.d.), pp. 24–5.

13 Mark Swanson, ‘Folly to the *Ḥunafā°*: The Crucifixion in Early Christian-Muslim Controversy’ in Emmanouela Grypeou, Mark Swanson and David Thomas (eds) *The Encounter of Eastern Christianity with Early Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), pp. 237–56, especially p. 238. Cf. R. Bell’s introduction in Montgomery Watt and R. Bell, *Introduction to the Qur°an*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1989); Watt reflects on the fact that the conception of sacrifice (in the context of Christ) is absent in the Qur°an and that it ‘never speaks of the atonement or saving work of Jesus’ (p. 158).

14 There is a general perception that within the early tradition there was not an awareness of the soteriological and redemptive implications of the crucifixion and that sensitivities with regards to such issues developed much later in that exegetical and polemical strategies to counter theological arguments were formulated and reflected in the later *tafsīr* and related works. Lawson makes the point that the ayas and sura in which the reference to the crucifixion appears ‘does not have any aspect of Christian belief or doctrine as its theme or purpose’, but it is possible that the reverse might be true. For a study of the pre-Islamic context of Christianity in Arabia in terms of denominations and history, see J.S. Trimmingham, *Christianity Among the Arabs in Pre-Islamic Times* (London: Longman, 1979). See also Barbara Finster’s ‘Arabs in Late Antiquity: An Outline of the Cultural Situation in the Peninsula at the Time of Muhammad’ in Angelika Neuwirth, Nicolai Sinai and Michael Marx (eds), *The Qur°an in Context: Historical and Literary Investigations into the Qur°anic Milieu* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), pp. 61–114, see pp. 70–5 with reference to Christianity. See also Robert Hoyland, *Arabia and the Arabs: From the Bronze Age to the Coming of Islam* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), pp. 147–50 and pp. 234–7, and the different articles in *The Arabs and Arabia on the Eve of Islam*, ed. F.E. Peters (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999).

15 Lawson links Docetism to the great Christological debates which deliberated over the nature of Jesus and mentions that a defining consensus emerged at the Council of Nicaea (325 AD). Although a wide range of issues had been addressed there, including determining the date of Easter, twenty canons were formulated. The arguments about the application of the terms *homoousis* ('of the same substance') and *homoiousis* ('of a similar substance') with respect to defining the relationship between God and Christ did continue to the extent that even before Constantine's death in 337 AD, the controversy resurfaced. The Councils of Constantinople (381 AD) and Chalcedon in (451 AD) also sought a resolution of this and other issues; thus Nicaea represents a significant stage in the moves towards a resolution of the controversy regarding the status of Christ. Thus, for example, in 357 AD a council at Sirmium agreed to a creed which was excessively Arian to the extent it was described by Hilary of Poitiers as the 'Blasphemy' of Sirmium. See Henry Bettenson's *Documents of the Christian Church*, selected and edited by Henry Bettenson and Chris Maunder, 3rd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 42–3; Chadwick, *The Early Church*, pp. 124–51, and pp. 203–5; see also W.H.C. Frend, *The Rise of Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), pp. 173–80; for an indication of the discussions on the nature of Christ through the early literature, including materials on Docetism, Monarchianism and Arianism, see Bettenson's *Documents of the Christian Church*, pp. 38–49; Lewis Ayers, *Nicaea and Its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); J. Stevenson (ed.), *Creeds, Councils and Controversies: Documents Illustrating the History of the Church AD 337–461*, 2nd edn (London: SPCK, 1988); and G. Stroumsa, 'The Incorporeality of God: Context and Implications of Origen's Position', *Religion* 13 (1983), pp. 345–58.

16 Chadwick, *The Early Church*, p. 124 and pp. 129–36; Harry H. Wolfson 'Philosophical Implications of Arianism and Apollinarianism', *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 12 (1958), pp. 5–28; R. Hanson, 'The Source and Significance of the Fourth "Oratio contra Arianos" Attributed to Athanasius', *Vigiliae Christianae* 42:3 (1988), pp. 257–66; Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004). The general implication is that in some ways Arius was taking up arguments posited by Origen, whom, it is argued, accentuated the created quality of the Son. In the letter of the Synod of Nicaea dealing with the condemnation of Arius it is mentioned that 'it was unanimously decided that his impious opinions should be anathematized together with all the blasphemous sayings and expressions which he has uttered in his blasphemies, affirming that "the Son of God is from what is not" and "there was (a time) when he was not"; saying also that the son of God, in virtue of his free-will, is capable of evil and good, and calling him a creature and a work' (Bettenson, *Documents of the Christian Church*, pp. 40–1).

17 Chadwick, *The Early Church*, p. 124;

18 Peter Widdicombe, *The Fatherhood of God from Origen to Athanasius* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 146–4, pp. 153–4, pp. 205–6 and p. 224; Widdicombe explains that in Athanasius' view Adam's fall from grace together with his disobedience is something in which all men share: the condition of the fallen man is one predisposed to sinning and that he can only be 'redeemed from this condition through a saviour who is both fully God and fully man'; see also Rowan Williams, *Arius: Heresy and Tradition* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1987); and Ilaria L.E. Ramelli, 'Origen, Bardaisan, and the Origin of Universal Salvation', *Harvard Theological Review* 102:2 (2009), pp. 135–68.

19 As previously noted, Lawson insists that the set of ayas in which the reference to the crucifixion verses is situated relates specifically to the condemnation of disbelief and is therefore impertinent to the Qur'an's discussion of the historicity of the crucifixion.

20 Lawson remarks that research has been unable to produce any *aḥādīth* on the crucifixion of Jesus that emanate from the Prophet; most of the reports on the topic are technically *āthār*,

linked with Companions (p. 47). Neal Robinson has suggested a large portion of the class of eschatological traditions, in which Jesus features prominently, was inspired through contact with Gnostics (see Robinson, arts 'Crucifixion' and 'Jesus' in *Encyclopaedia of the Qurʾān*). There is however one such Prophetic tradition which has Jesus symbolically breaking the cross. The tradition is cited by al-Bukhārī, and in it the Prophet states: 'by him in whose hands my soul rests, the son of Mary is indeed on the verge of descending amongst you dispensing justice and equity: he will break the cross; kill swine; abolish the poll-tax; wealth will flow abundantly to the extent that no one will accept it: for a single prostration will be finer than the world and all it comprises' (see the section in al-Bukhārī on *Bāb nuzūl ʿIsā b. Maryam in al-Kutub al-sitta: mawsūʿat al-ḥadīth al-sharīf*, ed. Šāliḥ b. ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz Āl-Shaykh (Riyadh: Dār al-Salām, 1999), *Kitāb aḥādīth al-anbiyāʾ*, p. 282, no. 3,448).

21 Morris Seale, *Qurʾan and Bible: Studies in Interpretation and Dialogue* (London: Croom Helm, 1978). One puzzling question on this subject relates to why were figures from the Islamic tradition prepared to acknowledge the historicity of the crucifixion? There is no indication that there were any theological imperatives in play; it is patently obvious that individuals who spoke of accepting the historicity of the crucifixion did not attach any salvific importance to it, although it is striking that it is amongst much later scholars that such views are countenanced. Equally, the distinction that the Jews did not crucify Jesus and that it is 'different from saying that Jesus was not crucified' was not picked up on in the classical literature of *tafsīr*. One wonders whether, if there had been any reservations about the Qurʾan's denial of the crucifixion, early *tafsīr* scholars, who were intrepidly inclined to incorporate all sorts of divergent and conflicting opinions, would have been alert to this fact; the conspicuous absence of any mention of opposition may lend weight to the view that the Qurʾan's denial of the crucifixion was always believed to be incontrovertible.

22 See Swanson, 'Folly to the *Ḥunafāʾ*', p. 239 and n. 12. Cf. Robert Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw it: A Survey and Evaluation of Christian, Jewish, and Zoroastrian Writings on Early Islam* (Princeton: Darwin Press, 1997), pp. 279–82; Robert Hoyland, *Arabia and the Arabs: from the Bronze Age to the Coming of Islam* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), see pp. 147–50 and pp. 234–7 for the discussion of Christianity in the Arabian Peninsula and related issues. Swanson's work is cited and discussed by Lawson: p. 7, n. 12.



**Interpreting al-Thaʿlabī's Tales of the Prophets: Temptation, Responsibility and Loss.** By M.O. Klar. Routledge Studies in the Qurʾan (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009). Pp. 249. £80.00.

The *Tales of the Prophets* of al-Thaʿlabī is a remarkable medieval achievement: a literary, religious and hagiographic masterpiece and the closest thing we have to a medieval Islamic bestseller. Popular from the day it was written in the fifth/eleventh century until now, its many manuscripts are spread all over the Islamic world. Published early on in the history of Arabic printing, there is still hardly a year that passes without a new reprint. It has been translated into all the major Islamic languages and is now available in full in French, German and English – a rare honour for a text from the field of Islamic Studies, only the more prestigious Islamic