

Crucifixion

HISTORY AND PRACTICE

By Michael J. Caba

Folly

The author said it: the message at the very heart of his faith was folly, not worth the paper it was written on, at least to some; but to others it was the very essence of genius, the high bar of wisdom and the core of true spirituality. Indeed, to demonstrate the profound contrasts in the way the crucifixion of Christ was perceived the writer explained plainly, “Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God” (1 Cor 1:23–24, NIV).

But why these polar opposite reactions; why was the crucifixion of Christ viewed by some as nonsense but by others as profound wisdom? Further, to the modern reader who is far removed from the crucifixion of Christ, doesn't the whole business often seem to be, honestly, quite irrelevant in any case? Yet, there was indeed much ado about something for those who experienced the event firsthand; and for those today with a curious mind, the search to know why it had such an impact and why it brought such varying reactions can lead to some interesting insight into this epoch-making death—a death that still touches us to this very day. Accordingly, let us take a look at the history and practice of the act of crucifixion itself with the hope of gaining some insight into this violent death of Jesus.

Background

The English word “cross” comes from the Latin word “*crux*” and leads eventually to the word crucifixion.¹ Yet, divining the source of the words is easier than locating the precise starting point of the practice, especially when it is noted that the gruesome procedure of punishing a person by suspending him on a piece of wood, either dead or alive, reaches far back in time

to primitive and unrecorded peoples and eras. Nevertheless, one suitable place to start our survey is with the nasty Assyrians, a brutish group if there ever was one. To give just a short sample of their cruelty we need only to note that they actually bragged about, among other cruelties, *flaying* their enemies.² Yet, despite their decidedly beastly nature, they had a delicate artistic side as well, and with it they proudly portrayed their handiwork of impaling victims on large stakes as shown below. The picture comes from the ancient Assyrian capital of Nineveh, and portrays the assault in roughly 700 BC by the Assyrian king Sennacherib on the Jewish city of Lachish³—which, for those who are interested, is an assault that is also briefly referred to in the Bible in 2 Kings 18:17. Further, in a simple businesslike manner, Sennacherib gives us this concise claim about one of his other victories: “I assaulted Ekron and killed the officials and patricians who had committed the crime and hung their bodies on poles surrounding the city.”⁴



Impaled citizens of Lachish.

Michael Luddeni

Though not precisely the same as our mental image of crucifixion which envisions a person nailed to a T-shaped cross, still, the *idea* behind impalement is quite similar to our picture of the act. Indeed, in actual practice the scheme of punishing a person by suspending them on a stake was accomplished by a variety of means. Nonetheless, the basic purpose in all of the varieties was essentially the same, that is, to punish an adversary in as cruel a manner as possible, both physically and mentally (i.e., shame), with the intention of discouraging others from engaging in behavior for which the suspended individual was purportedly guilty, thus the public display. In straightforward language, it was intended as both a horrible punishment and a dire warning.

Persians

Moving ahead in time from the Assyrian era, we come to the Persians whose empire, beginning in the sixth century BC and running for over 200 years, stretched from Turkey to India. Though often thought of as “tolerant,” they were not adverse to a little brutality when it suited their purposes—actually, to a lot of brutality. In fact, a number of references are given in the Greek historian Herodotus regarding the practice of crucifixion by the Persians. For instance, the following indicates a strong propensity toward the practice via a massive display in an honored city:

Thus was Babylon taken for the second time. Darius having become master of the place, destroyed the wall, and tore down all the gates; for Cyrus had done neither the one nor the other when he took Babylon. He then chose out near three thousand of the leading citizens, and caused them to be crucified, while he allowed the remainder still to inhabit the city.⁵

Though this type of mass execution of defenseless enemies may seem an entirely unnecessary action, one can possibly see some amount of justice in the act of crucifixion if it is used against, say, a rapist; and so Herodotus relates that the Persian king Xerxes intended its application on just such a perpetrator. The historian says, “He had previously raped the virgin...for which reason King Xerxes intended to have him impaled.”⁶ Importantly, this instance brings out a feature common to the punishment by crucifixion, namely, it was often meant for the vilest of criminals, the scum of the earth so to speak; and in this we begin to get an inkling as to why the crucifixion of Christ, purportedly the Son of God, was such a contradiction in terms. How could such an elevated individual, if he *truly* was an elevated individual, end up experiencing a punishment intended for those on the other end of the spectrum? In antiquity this simply didn’t make sense, but more on this later.

Greeks

Stepping forward in time, the great Persian Empire was to meet its demise at the hands of Alexander the Great in 330 BC; however, the practice of crucifixion would continue unabated. For instance, after Alexander conquered the city of Tyre he poured out his wrath on the vanquished losers with a mass

crucifixion related as follows: “After that the king’s wrath furnished the victors with an awful spectacle; 2000 men...hung nailed to crosses along a great stretch of the shore.”⁷ Clearly, the advanced culture of the Greeks that was to sweep across the ancient world still retained considerable barbarity at its core.

Moving ahead, following the death of Alexander the Great in 323 BC the land he had conquered was divided among his generals, with the eastern section of the territory being referred to as the Seleucid Empire that in turn often had control of the Jewish homeland. From this empire there eventually came a king by the name of Antiochus IV Epiphanes, a man of some infamy for sacrificing a pig on the Jewish altar and other assorted offenses.⁸ In addition to his sacrilegious behavior, he could churn out cruelty to a prodigious degree as is noted by the quote below derived from the historian Josephus. This quote involves the actions taken by Antiochus against the Jews who opposed him, and it is one of the more brutal accounts of crucifixion that we have from all of antiquity:

...on which account they everyday underwent great miseries and bitter torments; for they were whipped with rods and their bodies were torn to pieces, and were crucified while they were still alive and breathed: they also strangled those women and their sons whom they had circumcised, as the king had appointed, hanging their sons about their necks as they were upon the crosses. And if there were any sacred book of the law found, it was destroyed; and those with whom they were found miserably perished as well.⁹

From this type of portrayal we can see the continued utilization of crucifixion, even by purportedly civilized cultures, on both conquered people and the criminal elements of ancient society; and with this behavior the question still nags: how is this type of punishment fit for one such as Jesus?

Jews

And now to the Jews. Even as they often served as the victims of crucifixion, some of the Jews were not above using the procedure themselves, even, surprisingly enough, on fellow Jews. As an example, during the rule of Alexander Jannaeus (c. 103–76 BC) there was civil war among the Jewish people, and from this conflict a mass execution by crucifixion is attributed to the very hands of the ruler himself. Josephus tells us in the following quote how Jannaeus took revenge on his Jewish countrymen who had opposed him during the civil war:

...and when he had taken the city, and gotten the men into his power, he brought them to Jerusalem, and did one of the most barbarous actions in the world to them; for as he was feasting with his concubines, in the sight of all the city, he ordered about eight hundred of them to be crucified; and while they were living, he ordered the throats of their children and wives to be cut before their eyes. This was indeed by way of revenge for the injuries they had done him; which punishment yet was of an inhumane nature...¹⁰

Clearly, disturbing examples of humanity’s inhumanity are

on display as we continue to examine these cases in which crucifixion was used in such a ghastly manner. Yet, it is not just a horror show that we seek, it is understanding and insight that we are after. So as we survey these points in time, we need to keep adding points of perception; and among the Jews there is one point of particular note that should be inserted here that will help us to gain some insight into the crucifixion of Jesus. Jewish law has this interesting passage in Deuteronomy 21:22–23: “If a man is guilty of a capital offense and is put to death, and you impale him on a stake, you must not let his corpse remain on the stake overnight, but must bury him the same day. For an impaled body is an affront to God: you shall not defile the land that the LORD your God is giving you to possess.”¹¹ This particular translation uses the phrase, “impaled him on a stake,” while other translations capture the same idea by using such phrases as, “exposed on a pole” (NIV) or even, “hang him on a tree” (KJV). In any case, the idea is the same; specifically, a hanging dead body is an affront to God. Thus, not only was a crucified person an outsider among people, that person was offensive to God himself. In essence, a crucified soul inhabited a very *low* place, if not the very *lowest* place, in all of existence. But again, why was Jesus in such a low place?

Romans

Not to be outdone by others, the Romans, too, were masters at this deadly art. Examples are plentiful, with Julius Caesar providing a fine case in point. After being captured by pirates, Caesar managed to escape and returned to avenge his tormentors with some torment of his own. Plutarch relates the turn of events: “Caesar paid no further attention to him. He went to Pergamum, took the pirates out of prison and crucified the lot of them, just as he often told them he would do when he was on the island and they imagined that he was joking.”¹²

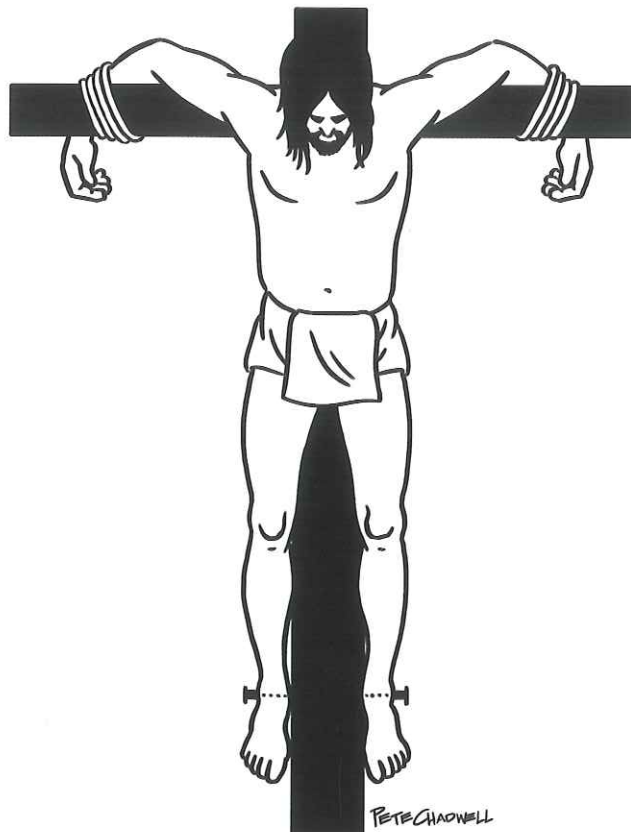
Further, when the Jewish revolt against the Romans occurred (66–73 AD), the final siege of Jerusalem turned into a scene to outdo many others in its ferocity. Josephus, again, is our source, and he relates the following actions by the Roman soldiers against their Jewish enemies: “They were first whipped and then tormented with all sorts of tortures, before they died...the soldiers out of the wrath and hatred they bore the Jews, nailed those they caught to the crosses in different postures, by way of jest.”¹³ As an additional observation, it can be seen from these

words of Josephus that persons assigned to death by crucifixion were often brutally tortured prior to the final act itself—and then sadistically treated as playthings.

Yet, even though many crucifixions occurred in ancient Israel, only one person’s skeletal remains have ever been found that give clear evidence

of having been crucified. In 1968 the bones of a man were discovered in an excavation in the northeastern area of modern Jerusalem, and the archaeologist responsible for the find identified the remains as coming from the Roman period of Jerusalem’s history.¹⁴ The discovery, which is now in the Israel Museum, shows an iron nail still in place through the right heel bone.

Interestingly enough, investigators have pieced the full scenario back together and have come to the conclusion that the man was affixed to the upper horizontal bar of the cross by ropes—no nails or further damage were found in his other bones—and that each leg was nailed to one side of the vertical piece of the cross as shown in the next drawing.¹⁵ This scenario



© M. Caba, based on J. Zias and E. Sekeles

Crucified man reconstruction.

further serves to point out the variety involved with the process when it is noted that Jesus was nailed by both his feet and hands to the cross (cf. Jn 20:25). Still, whatever the method used, the process was meant to facilitate a slow and agonizing death, and, despite various claims to the contrary, it appears that there is uncertainty as to the precise cause of death; in fact, a variety of causes could have led to the demise of the victim, including heart failure, asphyxiation, shock and more.¹⁶

Furthermore, as one scholar has noted, we see that the Romans followed the typical pattern of applying this punishment to those of *low* rank: “For a host of crimes Rome punished criminals of low status with aggravated or ultimate punishments (*summa supplicia*), which included exposure to wild beasts, crucifixion and burning alive.”¹⁷ Without a doubt, then, “Crucifixion was widespread and frequent, above all in Roman times;”¹⁸ with the most well-known crucifixion of all having taken place at their hands.



BiblePlaces.com

A heel bone with nail from a crucified man.

Madness or Genius

By way of this brief survey, we have seen the widespread practice of crucifixion in its various forms, from single stakes to other wooden configurations. The sufferers, being affixed by a variety of means, were often physically tortured beforehand, and, in many cases, psychologically humiliated as well, with final death occurring via a variety of possible bodily failures. Further, the overall practice was reserved primarily for the most reviled of perpetrators, including criminals, traitors, enemy combatants and the like. In effect, it was a horrible punishment reserved for the despised, and it was used to warn an observant public of the consequences meted out for certain behaviors.

But why Jesus; and, perhaps better yet, why would the Christians loudly proclaim the death of their leader by such a means, especially against all the accusations of madness and folly? Didn't the Christians have a public relations machine that was sensitive to the opinions of others and couldn't they tailor their message to the felt needs of the day; or had they truly discovered something original that they just needed to report?

To bring the issue into even sharper focus, one of the early church leaders, Justin Martyr, put his finger on the heart of the allegations of folly that were being made against the Christians:

For they proclaim our madness to consist in this, that we give to a crucified man a place second to the unchangeable and eternal God, the creator of all; for they do not discern the mystery that is herein, to which, as we make it plain to you, we pray you to give heed.¹⁹

Notice the mystery: a "crucified man" was being given an honored seat right next to the eternal Creator; the lowest was seated beside the highest, and in antiquity this positioning was perceived as madness. Gods and saviors in the ancient world were exalted and dignified, not humble, much less crucified of all things; and Christians were now confusing the natural hierarchy of things: their divine Jesus had come to earth, but in a humble manner! Such madness!

On the other hand, perhaps something new had occurred, something that could serve as an example to others. Admittedly, Christ's death was perceived primarily as a sacrifice for sin, and much more could be said about this offering—briefly, he was punished in our place. But note also these words from the Bible that portray him as an example of humility and service based precisely on his willingness to step down from an exalted position to sit in the lowest spot of all:

In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:

Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;

rather, he made himself nothing

by taking the very nature of a servant,

being made in human likeness.

And being found in appearance as a man,

he humbled himself

by becoming obedient to death—

even death on a cross! (Phil 2:5–8, NIV)

According to this passage, something fresh had broken through, for the exalted was said to have willingly come down to illustrate a life of service and concern for others. In essence, the divine was not only high-up, but had come down, and was truly concerned for us; and this was, among other things, an example to follow.

Madness or genius? You decide.

(This article first appeared in *Archaeological Diggings*, June/July 2014, and is used here with the permission of the author.)

Notes

¹ J.F.G. Cross, *The New International Dictionary of the Bible: Pictorial Edition*, J.D. Douglas et al., eds. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), 241.

² For examples see: *The Ancient Near East: An Anthology of Texts and Pictures*, J.B. Pritchard, ed. (Princeton: Princeton University, 2011), 246–72.

³ *The Ancient Near East: An Anthology of Texts and Pictures*, J.B. Pritchard, ed. (Princeton: Princeton University, 2011), plate 101.

⁴ A.L. Oppenheim, Sennacherib (704–681): The Siege of Jerusalem in *The Ancient Near East: An Anthology of Texts and Pictures*, J.B. Pritchard, ed. (Princeton: Princeton University, 2011), 270.

⁵ Herodotus 3:159 in *The History of Herodotus*, trans. George Rawlinson in *Great Books of the Western World*, vol. 5, M.J. Adler, ed. (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1990), 123.

⁶ Herodotus 4.43 in R.B. Strassler, ed., *The Landmark Herodotus: The Histories*, trans. A.L. Pervis (New York: Pantheon, 2007), 99.

⁷ Quintus Curtius, *History of Alexander*, vol. 1, trans. J.C. Rolfe (London: Loeb Classical Library, 1946), 205.

⁸ For examples see: Josephus, *The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged*, trans. W. Whiston (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004), 322–24.

⁹ Josephus, 324.

¹⁰ Josephus, 361.

¹¹ TANAKH. (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1985).

¹² Plutarch, *Fall of the Roman Republic*, trans. R. Warner and R. Seager (New York: Penguin, 2005), 256.

¹³ Josephus, quoted in M.W. Maslen and P.D. Mitchell, Medical theories on the cause of death in crucifixion, *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine*, 99 (2006), 185.

¹⁴ A. Tzaferis, Jewish Tombs at and near Giv'at har-Mivtar, Jerusalem, *Israel Exploration Journal*, 20 (Jerusalem: IES, 1970), 18–32.

¹⁵ J. Zias and E. Sekeles, The Crucified Man from Giv'at har-Mivtar: A Reappraisal, *Israel Exploration Journal*, 35 (Jerusalem: IES, 1985), *passim*.

¹⁶ M.W. Maslen and P.D. Mitchell, *passim*.

¹⁷ D.G. Kyle, *Spectacles of Death in Ancient Rome* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 53.

¹⁸ M. Hengel, *Crucifixion: In the ancient world and the folly of the message on the cross* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), 38.

¹⁹ J. Martyr, The First Apology, *Ante-Nicene Fathers: The Writings of the Fathers down to AD 325—The Apostolic Fathers, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus*, A. Roberts and J. Donaldson, eds. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 159.

Michael Caba holds an MA in Philosophy and Religion, an MA in Humanities, a Bachelors in Bible and an Associates in Engineering. He is on the faculty at Kilns College in Bend, Oregon, where he teaches Archaeology and the Bible, World Religions, and the Life of Jesus. He has done volunteer archaeology work in Israel with ABR.

