

Crucifixion

General Information

Crucifixion was a method of execution used by the Romans to punish slaves and foreigners. Hung from a crossbar astride an upright peg, the naked victim was allowed to hang as a public spectacle until dead. No vital organs were damaged, and death was slow agony. Prior to crucifixion, the victim was scourged and made to carry the crossbar to the execution site. The crucifixion of Jesus Christ followed this order of events (Mark 15:15; John 19:17). Though closely associated with Rome, crucifixion originated with the Phoenicians and Persians. It was practiced from the 6th century BC until the 4th century AD. The Roman emperor Constantine I banned crucifixion in 337.

Because Jesus was crucified, the Cross has assumed theological significance for Christians. It symbolizes reconciliation with God through faith in Christ (1 Cor. 1:18 - 25), whose life, death, and Resurrection are proof of God's forgiveness of human sin.

Douglas Ezell

Crucifixion (Editor's Comments)

There appear to be a number of misconceptions regarding the Crucifixion of Jesus. Jesus was NOT the first nor the only person to be crucified. The Romans had used that method of execution for at least 70 years before Jesus was Crucified. In around 40 BC, in Rome, a historian recorded that 2,000 people were crucified in a single day, for the entertainment of Quintilius Varus! About 40 years after Jesus' Crucifixion, the Romans crucified around 500 per day in 70 AD.

Even by Jesus' time, it is clear that they had developed "efficient" methods. For example, on that day of the 2,000 crucifixions, it seems unlikely that the workers would have had the time to dig 2,000 holes and built 2,000 crosses, just for practical reasons. The following articles indicate that it was extremely common for the upright pole to be left in place, at the standard location for the crucifixions, and that Jesus (and the others) almost certainly carried just the horizontal cross-bar, still a heavy burden. Once there, the execution crew would have lifted Jesus and the cross-bar up onto the already vertical pole.

Most modern depictions of the Crucifixion show Jesus being quite high up, but that almost certainly was not the case. Victims of crucifixion generally had their feet just a foot or two above the ground. Also, part of the "punishment" of crucifixion (and a visible example of that punishment for the community as a whole) was that it was generally an extended process. One of the articles below even mention that some crosses had a small "seat" area to partially support the weight of the body, with the intent of extending the suffering further.

These matters are confirmed by a variety of Jewish laws of the time. Several dealt with the "official" ways of determining the moment of death such that the body could be taken down. Yev. 120b mentions that one of those methods of confirmation was when stray animals began to feed on the flesh of the feet and legs, which could be reached because of the legs being close to the

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Finally, as a confirmation of the reality of the Crucifixion of Jesus, Jewish records record the event. In the Talmud, Sanh. 7:4 refers to Him being subjected to *halakhah*, being "hanged alive". This, along with stoning, was the legal punishment for "leading others astray or practicing sorcery". Sanh. 6:4 also refers to the event.

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Crucifixion was a common mode of punishment among heathen nations in early times. It is not certain whether it was known among the ancient Jews; probably it was not. The modes of capital punishment according to the Mosaic law were, by the sword (Ex. 21), strangling, fire (Lev. 20), and stoning (Deut. 21). This was regarded as the most horrible form of death, and to a Jew it would acquire greater horror from the curse in Deut. 21:23. This punishment began by subjecting the sufferer to scourging. In the case of our Lord, however, his scourging was rather before the sentence was passed upon him, and was inflicted by Pilate for the purpose, probably, of exciting pity and procuring his escape from further punishment (Luke 23:22; John 19:1).

The condemned one carried his own cross to the place of execution, which was outside the city, in some conspicuous place set apart for the purpose. Before the nailing to the cross took place, a medicated cup of vinegar mixed with gall and myrrh (the sopor) was given, for the purpose of deadening the pangs of the sufferer. Our Lord refused this cup, that his senses might be clear (Matt. 27:34). The spongeful of vinegar, sour wine, posca, the common drink of the Roman soldiers, which was put on a hyssop stalk and offered to our Lord in contemptuous pity (Matt. 27:48; Luke 23:36), he tasted to allay the agonies of his thirst (John 19:29). The accounts given of the crucifixion of our Lord are in entire agreement with the customs and practices of the Roman in such cases. He was crucified between two "malefactors" (Isa. 53:12; Luke 23:32), and was watched by a party of four soldiers (John 19:23; Matt. 27:36, 54), with their centurion.

The "breaking of the legs" of the malefactors was intended to hasten death, and put them out of misery (John 19:31); but the unusual rapidity of our Lord's death (19:33) was due to his previous sufferings and his great mental anguish. The omission of the breaking of his legs was the fulfilment of a type (Ex. 12:46). He literally died of a broken heart, a ruptured heart, and hence the flowing of blood and water from the wound made by the soldier's spear (John 19:34). Our Lord uttered seven memorable words from the cross, namely, (1) Luke 23:34; (2) 23:43; (3) John 19:26; (4) Matt. 27:46, Mark 15:34; (5) John 19:28; (6) 19:30; (7) Luke 23:46.

(Easton Illustrated Dictionary)

Cross, Crucifixion: Advanced Information

The Greek word for "cross." stauros. literally refers to an upright. pointed stake or pole. The word

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Method of Crucifixion

Crucifixion involved elevating the condemned upon a pole, some form of frame or scaffolding, or a natural tree, thus exposing him to public view and derision. In many cases the individual was put to death through some other means and all or a part of the body (usually the head) then elevated. In other circumstances it became the actual means of execution. Because of both the effect of crucifixion upon the body and the lengthy period which usually elapsed before death, it represented the most painful, cruel, and barbaric form of execution. Its roots are lost in history. In one form or another it is known to have been practiced by many groups (such as the Indians, Scythians, Celts, Germani, Britanni, and Taurians) but is most closely associated with the Persians, Carthaginians, Phoenicians, Greeks, and especially the Romans. Some evidence suggests that it may have been associated with religious human sacrifice as well as a means of punishment.

Earlier forms probably involved impaling the condemned on a single pole or suspending him by wedging the head between a "Y" at one end of the implement. By NT times there seem to have been several different forms of "crosses" commonly used by the Romans. In addition to the single pole (*crux simplex*), most involved the use of at least two separate pieces of wood to construct a frame. However, crucifixion gave executioners opportunity to use their most cruel and sadistic creativity; victims were occasionally hung in grotesque positions by a variety of means. The two cross forms most likely used for the execution of Jesus are the St. Anthony's cross (*crux commissa*), shaped like a "T," or the Latin cross (*crux immissa*), on which the vertical piece rises above both the horizontal cross-bar (*patibulum*) and the head of the victim; the statement in Matt. 27:37 (cf. Luke 23:38) that the inscription was placed "over his head" and most ancient tradition favor the latter.

Detailed descriptions of crucifixion are few; writers seem to have avoided the subject. Recent archaeological discoveries, including skeletal remains of a crucifixion in first century Palestine (at Giv'at ha-Mivtar in Jerusalem), have added considerably to knowledge of the act. It seems that the Gospel accounts of the death of Jesus describe a standard Roman procedure for crucifixion. After the pronouncement of sentence, the condemned was required to carry the horizontal piece to the place of execution, always outside the city. The leader of the four-man execution squad led the procession bearing a sign detailing the reason for the execution. There the victim was flogged (this seems to have preceded condemnation in the case of Jesus, possibly to elicit sympathy). The victim's outstretched arms were affixed to the cross-bar by either nails or ropes. This was then raised and secured to the perpendicular pole (which in some areas may have been left in place permanently, both for convenience and as a warning). A small board or peg may have been provided as sort of a seat to bear some of the weight of the condemned (this actually may have prolonged suffering by prohibiting suffocation). The feet were then secured in a manner forcing the knees into a bent position. Contrary to popular contemporary opinion, crosses were not high; the feet were probably only a few inches above the ground. The sign describing the accusation was secured to the cross.

Death usually came slowly; it was not unusual for persons to survive for days on the cross.

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hanged man is accursed by God," was understood to mean that the very method of death brought a divine curse upon the crucified. Thus, the idea of a crucified Messiah posed a special problem for such Jews as Paul (cf. Gal. 3:13; 1 Cor. 1:27-29).

Significance of the Cross

NT writers assume the historicity of the crucifixion of Jesus and focus their attention upon its significance. In it they understand that he, "who was in the form of God, did not consider equality with God a thing to be grasped at," was willing to "humble himself," take "on the form of a servant," and endure "even the death on the cross" (Phil. 2:6-8). This demonstrates the ultimate of humiliation and degradation. Yet, they affirm, the crucifixion of Jesus, the Messiah (Christ), was the will and act of God with eternal and cosmic significance. At the simplest level, the crucifixion of Jesus was the means by which God provided salvation, the forgiveness of sins (cf. 1 Cor. 15:3). Christ crucified becomes the summary of the Christian message (1 Cor. 2:2). The cross of Jesus, the beloved Son of God, is the supreme demonstration of the love God has for sinful man (cf. John 3:16; 15:16). In Jesus' death God deals concretely with the sin and guilt which offends his holiness and separates man from his Creator. Because of the cross God becomes both the righteous and just Judge and, at the same time, the one who makes forgiveness available and justifies believers (cf. Rom. 3:26). The condemning legal demands set against man have been "canceled," nailed to the cross (Col. 2:14). The word of the cross is God's word of reconciliation (II Cor. 5:19).

The cross is also the symbol of discipleship. To first century Palestinians, who often witnessed the condemned carrying the crossbar to the site of their final torture, Jesus' word, "If any man will come after me, let him take up his cross and follow me" (Mark 8:34; cf. Matt. 10:38; Luke 14:27), must have come with a jolting, graphic impact. Jesus insists that the humiliation and suffering that culminated in his crucifixion were to characterize the experience of his followers. "It is," he says, "for the disciple to be like his teacher" (Matt. 10:24). Crucifixion becomes a part of the identification between Christ and the believer who is "crucified with Christ" (Gal. 2:20). The negative side of the characteristics of the new life of the Christian consists in having "crucified" sinful natures and desires (Gal. 5:24).

When understood in its historical, social context, Paul's statement that the proclamation of Christ crucified is a "stumbling block" or "scandal" (skandalon) to the Jews and "foolishness" (moria) to the Gentiles is both logical and clear. Yet for Christians it remains an act and demonstration "of the power and wisdom of God" (1 Cor. 1:23-24).

J J Scott, Jr.
(Elwell Evangelical Dictionary)