

The Horror of Roman Crucifixion

In the name of religion, one of the most torturous forms of execution was born: crucifixion.

It all started with the Persians, about 500 years before Christ. Though not all students of Bible history agree, many speculate that crucifixion started because of Ormazd (OR-mahzed), a Persian god to whom the earth was sacred. To keep from defiling the earth, the Persians raised their victims of execution above the ground.

Candidates for Crucifixion

In the time of Christ, the most likely candidates for crucifixion were Hardened criminals, poor folk, runaway slaves, and defeated enemies.

When Roman general Titus laid siege to Jerusalem in A.D. 70, he crucified so many Jews that he ran out of parking space for the crosses. Josephus, the Jewish historian of the day, said the Roman leader crucified every Jew who was captured outside the city during the siege. He killed as many as 500 a day during the siege, which lasted over three months.

Even the Romans recognized how deplorable this form of execution was. We know this because they made it illegal to crucify Roman citizens.

The Jews hated this form of execution as well. Seldom do we find Jews crucifying Jews. Even Herod the Great, for all of his cruelty, did not crucify. He did have Palestinian babies killed in an effort to kill the Christ child, and he did murder his wife and execute his sons, but he didn't crucify.

A notable exception of a Jew crucifying his own was Jewish ruler Alexander Jannaeus (JAN-e-us), who crucified 800 rebels who were members of the Pharisee sect.

The reason Jews were reluctant to crucify their own was because Jewish law called for quick executions that were as painless as possible: stoning, strangulation, or throwing the condemned from a high cliff.

Step 1: The Beating

In this life, we'll never know for certain all the grim details about how Jesus died—things, such as what kind of whip the Romans used to beat Him, exactly where the Romans nailed the spikes, and the exact cause of death. The fact is, crucifixion is a bit like butchering an animal. Each butcher has his own technique. Likewise, each Roman executioner's technique may have been somewhat distinctive. Still, with the help of Scripture and secular history, we can begin to get a pretty vivid picture of the horror of Roman crucifixion.

The Bible says Jesus was beaten before He was crucified. This was a common prelude to the execution. The Romans often used a whip that had lashes that were studded with either bones, iron pellets, or both. And the Romans were not limited to 40 strokes—the maximum allowed by Jewish law. In fact, it was not uncommon to beat the victim to the very brink of death. The grisly whipping left the victim with deep cuts in the back, buttocks, and legs. Blood loss would have been considerable. Many died beneath the whip. Others lost their sanity. Few remained conscious.

Next came the march to the execution ground. In the

case of Jesus, it was to the hill called Calvary, meaning The Skull. It was common for the Romans to carry in front of the processional a tablet that announced the charges against the condemned. Sometimes the victim had to wear this around his neck. Such a tablet may well have been the one that was nailed to the top of Christ's cross. It identified Him as "King of the Jews."

Kinds of Crosses

► **Upright Poles.** Though impalement on a stake might not be considered crucifixion on a cross, it was certainly a predecessor to it. Sketches and stone engravings show scenes of such impalement that date back even before the Persians. One engraving in the British Museum dates to about 700 B.C., and it shows Senacherib capturing the Palestinian town of Lachish. In this scene, victims were impaled through the chest and raised off the ground. In other such ancient scenes archaeologists have recovered, the victims are impaled through the bottom, in the same way an animal would be placed on a spit for roasting.

► **Latin Cross.** This is the kind of cross most Bible students believe was used in the crucifixion of Jesus. The crossbeam was placed a little below the top of the upright post. This crossbeam was the top timber of the cross, to which the victim's hands would later be tied or nailed. It was common for the prisoner to carry this to the execution site. The crossbeam was about 5 to 6 feet long and weighed 75 to 125 pounds. Writings of early Christians reveal this was the cross on which Jesus died. The Gospel reference to a sign hung above the head of Jesus supports this theory.

► **St. Anthony's Cross.** Here the crossbar was placed at the top of the upright post, making the cross look like a capital T. This style of cross was eventually named after a martyr who died on one like it. Some believe Jesus died on this cross, and that the sign placed above Him made the cross look like a Latin cross.

► **St. Andrew's Cross.** For this cross, a pair of posts were driven into the ground, then crossed to form an X. Early Christian tradition says Andrew, the disciple, was crucified on this style of cross because he asked not to die on the same kind of cross used for Jesus.

Step 2: The Nailing

Before nailing the prisoner to the cross, the executioners stripped the victim of all or nearly all his clothing. The discarded clothes became the fringe benefits of the soldiers. In addition to a loincloth, ancient Jews generally wore five articles of clothing: sandals, turban, belt, inner garment, and outer cloak. The first four were of about equal value. In the crucifixion of Jesus, his were divided among the four Roman soldiers, so says John's account of the Crucifixion. However, the outer cloak was more valuable than the other articles, so the soldiers gambled for it.

It was a custom in Jerusalem to offer the victim a drug to deaden the senses. This analgesic was prepared by a group of wealthy women in the city, according to ancient Jewish writings. The drug usually includ-

ed one of the tree resins of myrrh or frankincense mixed with wine. In Christ's case, it was myrrh—ironically, one of the three gifts by the wise men shortly after His birth.

Jesus refused the drugged wine. Some Bible students say this refusal illustrates Christ's willingness to endure, on our behalf, the full suffering that lay before Him. Others suggest He wanted a clear mind during the Crucifixion.

Then came the actual crucifixion. In the case of Jesus, at about 9 a.m. on what is today celebrated as Good Friday, the crossbeam was probably thrown on the ground, and Jesus was placed on it, with His shoulders against the wood.

A Roman soldier would then have felt for the depression in the wrist, a bony area connecting the wrist to the hand. He would then have driven a heavy, wrought-iron nail through the wrist and deep into the wood. Roman historical accounts reveal it was not common to drive the nail into the palm of the hands. Instead, the nails were usually driven into the wrist bones so the large, square nails would not strip out between the fingers under the weight of the victim.

Confusion over the placement of the nails comes from Jesus later inviting Thomas to "see my hands" (John 20:27). Then, as now, the wrists were considered part of the hands.

After the victim was attached to the timber, the crossbeam was lifted in place at or near the top of the upright post that was already mounted in the ground.

There is currently a great deal of speculation about how the victim's feet were nailed to the vertical post. Traditionally, Bible students have believed the feet were pressed backward against the post, one foot on top of the other, with both feet extended, toes down. With that, one nail would have been driven through the arch of the feet.

But new theories have surfaced, because of a 1968 discovery of a man who was crucified during the Roman period. Among the skeletal remains is a heel bone with a Roman spike still in it. Between the head of the nail and the bone are fragments of olive wood. To some scholars, this suggests that one nail was driven through a wooden plaque and then through both heels. With the feet pinned between the post and the plaque, the victim could not pull free of the nail.

Others suggest the feet straddled the upright post, with the left foot nailed to the left side and the right foot nailed with a separate spike to the right side.

Given the vast number of Roman crucifixion victims, the variety of executions, and the cruel imagination of humanity, all of these methods, among others, were probably used during the time of Christ.

On some upright posts there was probably a block of wood that served as a foot rest. An ancient caricature scrawled on a Roman wall suggests this. On some crosses, there was a horn-shaped projection upon which the victim could sit. Whether the cross of Jesus had either of these, we don't know. And we don't know exactly how His feet were attached to the Cross.

What we do know is that when the feet of Jesus were nailed to the Cross, the Crucifixion was complete. And the suffering was just beginning.

Cause of Death

The suffering of crucifixion came in many forms. Probably of least concern to any victim was the public disgrace. More immediate concerns were the pain of the nails, along with the persistence of gnats, flies, and birds the victim could not ward off. As the hours, and often days, dragged on, the victim suffered thirst, hunger, exhaustion, congestion, and difficulty in breathing. It often took about three days to die—sometimes longer.

We don't know, specifically, what caused Jesus to die. Some speculate He suffocated because of the position in which He was crucified. The speculation is that He could take only short, labored breaths, due to cramping and finally paralysis of the chest muscles. To get a full breath, the victim had to push upward; this put tremendous pressure on the nail-pierced feet and wrists.

Others suggest Jesus died of shock and heart failure. Following the heavy blood loss, the theory goes, His body began to go into shock. In response, what was left of His six quarts of blood began to separate into its two basic elements: cellular matter (about 45 percent of normal blood) and serum, similar to plasma (55 percent). Serum is a transparent, amber-colored liquid that would flow from a cut or a pimple if squeezed hard enough. Extra serum would then have been sent to the heart area and would have collected in the pericardial sac that encases the heart. On an X-ray, this would have shown up as an enlarged heart. If this is what happened, the pericardial fluid would have begun to compress the heart.

The actual cause of Christ's death, however, may have been related to a combination of factors: shock, exhaustion, asphyxiation, and finally heart failure.

After six hours on the Cross, Jesus died. Time of death was "the ninth hour," or 3 P.M.

This was a quick death, as far as crucifixions go. Had Jesus not died before sunset, His death would have been hastened; the Jews did not want bodies to remain on the cross after Friday's sunset, the beginning of their Sabbath.

To speed the execution, victims could be speared, choked to death in the smoke of a grass fire, or have their legs broken. (This breaking of legs apparently made it hard to push the body up into a position to exhale. In this case, death usually followed in a few minutes.) To make sure Jesus was dead, one of the soldiers plunged a spear into His side. The fact that blood and water, or serum, spurted out is evidence that Jesus had gone into shock, and that the transparent serum had already started to collect in the chest cavity.

For hundreds of years, before and after the time of Jesus, crucifixion was a widespread form of execution. About 300 years after Christ, Constantine, the first Roman emperor to favor Christianity, banned crucifixion. He did this because of what happened to Christ.

Thus, a torture that was probably started in the name of religion ended in the name of religion.

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