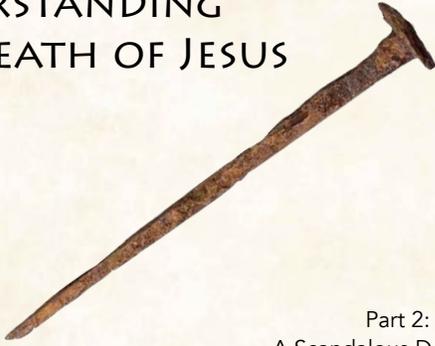


THE CRUCIFIXION: UNDERSTANDING THE DEATH OF JESUS



Part 2:
A Scandalous Death: The
Crucifixion in Historical
Context

OPENING QUESTION

- How would you answer the question, "Why did Jesus die?"



"For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God..."

- 1 Corinthians 1:18



"...We proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles."

-1 Corinthians 1:23



"They say that our *madness* consists in the fact that we put a *crucified man* in second place after the unchangeable and eternal God, the Creator of the world."

-Justin Martyr, early 2nd century



"To say that their ceremonies center on a man put to death for his crime and on the fatal wood of the cross is to assign to these abandoned wretches sanctuaries which are appropriate to them and the kind of worship they deserve."

-The pagan Caecilius in Minucius Felix's *Octavius* (197 AD)





"Alexamenos Worships His God"
Roman Graffiti c. 200 AD



THE DEATH OF A GOD?

- Pagan deities - death and apotheosis of immortal gods in the distant past
- "By contrast, to believe that the one pre-existent Son of the one true God, the mediator at creation and the redeemer of the world, had appeared in recent times in out-of-the-way Galilee as a member of the obscure people of the Jews, and even worse, had died the death of a common criminal on the cross, could only be regarded as a sign of madness." - Martin Hegel



THE CURSE OF A "TREE" IN JUDAISM

- "When someone is convicted of a crime punishable by death and is executed, and you hang him on a tree, his corpse must not remain all night upon the tree; you shall bury him that same day, for anyone hung on a tree is under God's curse. You must not defile the land that the Lord your God is giving you for possession." Deuteronomy 21:22-23



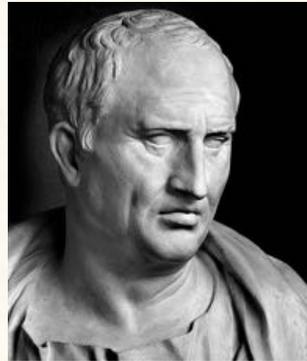
“The utter uniqueness of the New Testament gospel is not the foolishness itself, but the linkage of holy foolishness to an actual historical event of government-sponsored torture and execution—a happening, it must be emphasized, without any spiritual overtones or redeeming religious features...It requires a considerable effort of the imagination to enter into the first-century world of the Roman empire so as to understand the degree of offensiveness attached to crucifixion as a method of execution.”

– Fleming Rutledge, *The Crucifixion*



CICERO, “IN VERREM”

“[Crucifixion] should be far removed not only from the person of a Roman citizen but from his thoughts, his eyes, and his ears. For it is not only the actual occurrence of these things, or the endurance of the them, but liability to them, the expectation, indeed the very mention of them, that is unworthy of a Roman citizen and a free man.”



A BRIEF HISTORY OF CRUCIFIXION AS CAPITAL PUNISHMENT

- A mode of execution used by “barbarian” peoples prior to the Roman empire (Indians, Assyrians, Persians, Scythians, Taurians, Celts)
- Employed by the Carthaginians, from whom the Romans most likely adopted it
- Public executions used as deterrent to insurrection and criminal behavior



SYMBOLIC MEANINGS OF CRUCIFIXION IN THE ROMAN WORLD

- **Social meaning:** "We are superior, you are vastly inferior"
- **Political meaning:** Public humiliation of those who commit crimes against the state
- **Quasi-religious meaning:** Divine Caesar's dominance over local gods



THE "SUMMA SUPPLICIUM": THE EXTREME PUNISHMENT

- Modes of Roman capital punishment
 - *Decollatio* - Decapitation
 - *Damnatio ad bestias* - Death by animals
 - *Crematio* - burning
 - *Crux* - crucifixion



ROMAN PUNISHMENT AND CLASS JUSTICE

- Upper classes of Roman society (citizens) would receive more humane punishments (i.e. the Apostle Paul)
- Crucifixion almost always inflicted on lower classes, especially slaves



CRIMES WORTHY OF CRUCIFIXION

- Julius Paulus (200 AD), *Sententia*
 - Desertion to the enemy
 - Divulging state secrets
 - Inciting rebellion
 - Prophesying against rulers
 - Murder
 - Magic, "Nocturnal Impiety"



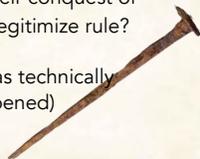
THE SLAVE'S PUNISHMENT "SERVILE SUPPLICIUM"

- The Roman world ran on slavery and lived in constant fear of slave revolts
- "I know the cross will be my grave; that is where my ancestors are..." - Sceledrus the Slave in *Miles Gloriosus* (205 BC)
- Special place set aside in Rome for crucifixion of slaves
- The Spartacus revolt - 6,000 slaves nailed to crosses on the Via Appia
- Slaves subject to the whims of masters and constant threat of death



JEWISH PRACTICES

- Jews practiced crucifixion in the Hasmonean Period under Alexander Jannaeus for cases of high treason; a practice borrowed from pagan world
- Jannaeus crucified 800 Pharisees. After his death, Pharisees crucified Sadducean advisors to the king.
- Herod the Great broke this tradition, perhaps because of the excessive use of the practice by the Romans in their conquest of Judea; deference to Jewish law (Deut. 21:23) to legitimize rule?
- Usual capital punishment was stoning, but this was technically illegal under Roman rule (though it certainly happened)



METHODS OF CRUCIFIXION

- Widely varied
- No comprehensive description of how it was done outside of the Gospels (due to Roman reluctance to talk about it)
- Usually conducted by the Roman military
- Allowed for excessive creativity and cruelty of the executioners



AN EXAMPLE FROM FLAVIUS JOSEPHUS

- During the Jewish revolt of AD 70, some Jews, mostly the poor, tried to escape the siege of Jerusalem to satiate their hunger
- The Roman general Titus had them captured and crucified as a sign to those still in the city
- 500 per day were crucified, so many that the Romans had to go ten miles outside the city to find enough wood to make crosses.



“So the soldiers, out of the wrath and hatred they bore the Jews, nailed those they caught, one after one way, and another after another, to the crosses, by way of jest, when their multitude was so great, that room was wanting for the crosses, and crosses wanting for the bodies.”

– Josephus Flavius, *The Jewish War*



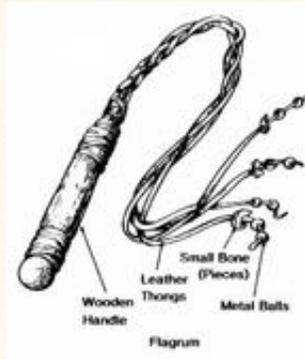
THE BASIC PATTERN OF CRUCIFIXION

- Scourging
- Carrying the cross piece
- Nailing and setting
- Waiting for death, which could be hastened by breaking the legs of the victim



SCOURGING

- Designed to weaken and humiliate the condemned
- "Flagrum" resulted in significant blood loss
- No limit to the number of blows in Roman law (39 in Jewish law)
- Would hasten death of the condemned as they hung on the cross

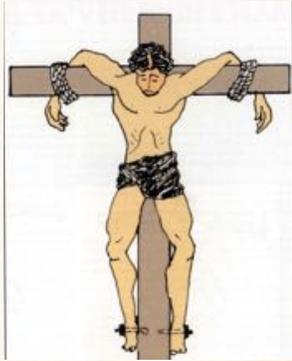


CARRYING THE PATIBULUM

- Public procession designed for further humiliation and mockery by bystanders
- Further weakening of the condemned
- Cross beam was reused, vertical piece permanently affixed in the ground
- Scholars posit a hole in the beam to be inserted over the cross piece



THE CROSS



DEATH BY CRUCIFIXION

- Asphyxiation or blood loss?
- Exposure (could often take days)
- Victims were crucified naked to enhance public humiliation
- Bodies often left on crosses to rot and be eaten by scavengers



SO WHY DID JESUS
DIE IN THIS WAY?

THE RELIGIOUS REASONS

- Actions and proclamations against the Temple (Matthew 21:12-17; 24:1-2; 26:61)
- Messianic claims - a mortal Messiah and a cosmic ruler (Matthew 26:63-63)
 - Ref. Daniel 7:13-14 - "The Son of Man"
 - Implies that Jesus will be their judge, not the other way around
 - "From now on..." present reality
- To get Jesus executed, the religious elite needed to transform these charges into political ones



THE POLITICAL REASONS

- Jewish leaders charge Jesus with implying treason against Rome (Luke 23:2)
 - Perverting the nation's loyalty to Rome
 - Forbidding payment of taxes
 - Claiming to be a king



PONTIUS PILATE: A PRAGMATIC RESPONSE

- Examined Jesus and determined he was innocent of the charges
- Worried that crowd would incite a riot
- Tries to placate by releasing Barabbas - an insurrectionist
- Finally agrees to crucifixion in order to make the problem go away



"KING OF THE JEWS"

- The condemned would wear a sign indicating the charge
- Religious leaders accuse Jesus of claiming kingship
- Pilate does not make this the charge but a mocking statement (mocks Jesus and religious leaders)
- Jesus is true king of Israel, Messiah



DEATH BETWEEN TWO "THIEVES"

- *lestai* - better translation, "insurgent"
- Same word used when Jesus cleanses the temple - "You have made it a den of *lestai*."
- The irony is that Jesus dies on a charge of insurrection against Rome when he actually preached against it!



THEOLOGICAL REASONS

- The question, "Why did Jesus die?" must move us to ask, "Why did he die in *this way*?" Why crucifixion?
- There are many other examples of martyrs, but we don't symbolize them by their mode of execution
- "The death of Jesus is different because the *how* is of unique importance." - Rutledge



THIS IS THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND...

- ...but why did this particular death have cosmic significance?
- Why did the early Christians say that the crucified Jesus was the true Son of God and Lord of all Creation?
- Why did they preach this message when it was most offensive thing they could possibly say in the Roman world?
- Why did Christianity grow and spread with this message?



“It is essential to remember that it was the preaching of the apostles and early Christians that created the church in the first place. Men and women did not forsake their former ways of life because they were offered spiritual direction or instructed in righteous living; they became converts because of the explosive news that they heard.”

– Fleming Rutledge, *The Crucifixion*



CRUCIFIXION: A GODLESS CONDITION

- “Religion” - an organized system of belief or a loose collection of ideas and practices projected out of humanity’s needs and wishes.
- “The basic distinction between religion and [Christian] faith is the propensity of religions to avoid suffering; to have light without darkness, vision without trust and risk, hope without an ongoing dialogue with despair—in short, Easter without Good Friday.” - Douglas J. Hall



“The cross is ‘irreligious’ because no human being individually or human beings collectively would have projected their hopes, wishes, longings, and needs onto a crucified man.”

– Fleming Rutledge, *The Crucifixion*



WHY CRUCIFIXION? (FLEMING RUTLEDGE)

- “Jesus situation under the harsh judgment of Rome was analogous to our situation under Sin. He was condemned; he was rendered helpless and powerless; he was stripped of his humanity; he was reduced to the status of a beast, declared unfit to live and deserving of a death proper to slaves—and what, according to Paul, were we if not slaves?”
- Jesus was crucified [because] no other mode of execution would have been commensurate with the extremity of humanity’s condition under Sin.



HOW DOES THIS HISTORICAL EVENT BECOME THE THEOLOGICAL EVENT?

- Christ died “according to the Scriptures”
- The Messiah, the representative of Israel, which was the representative of humanity, enters into the depth of the human condition
- He becomes as a slave and dies a slave’s death (Philippians 2)
- Thus the Son of God entered into solidarity with the lowest and least of all his creation, the nameless and forgotten “the offscouring of all things” (1 Cor. 4:13)



WHAT WE NEED:

- To reengage the meaning of the crucifixion we must:
- Understand the nature of Sin and Evil and the depth of the problem for both humans and creation
- Examine the ways in which the Scriptures lead us to the cross.



QUESTIONS?
