

REDISCOVERING THE RELIGIOUS TRADITION: MEANINGS, ASCETICS, AND PHILOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION/REDECOUVRIR LA TRADITION RELIGIEUSE: SENS, ASCETISME ET INTERPRÉTATION PHILOLOGIQUE

THE CRUCIFIXION OF JESUS CHRIST. THE ORIGINS OF THE CROSS AND ITS ANCIENT MEANINGS*

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Abstract: The present paper deals with historical origins of the cross as torture instrument during Antiquity, starting from the Persian Empire until Hellenistic Epoch. A special emphasize is put on the description of the ways in which crucifixion occurs in 1st B.C and 1st A.C, the additional torture modalities, the places dedicated, as well as on the emotional impact to the audience. Far apart the particular historical aspects and the analysis of how crucifixion penetrated in the area where Christ lived, His crucifixion is seen in the political context of the period, by taking into account the role of the political personalities implied and the essential anamnestic role for that particular event.

Keywords: Hellenism, Judaism, cross, torture.

We cannot integrate the meanings and the impact of the cross, and specifically the process of crucifixion within the context of the first century B.C. and the first century A.D., without going to its roots, without trying to understand the origins of the act of crucifixion, and without drawing a pattern of psychological and physical nature which have had occurred on the persons present at the process. Especially, when it comes to our Lord's sacrifice on the cross, the instrument of torture which brought us salvation for sin and the promise of eternal life, we cannot go further with the research without trying to

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imagine entering the minds and souls of the people who were witnesses to Jesus Christ's redemptive death on the cross. Nowadays we live in a time where anamnesis has the utmost importance in religious and social life, and going back to the times that our Lord Jesus Christ lived and trying to recapture the mood and the actual moments of the people in that time becomes very important. That's what we are trying to achieve in the following study, recapturing the meaning, the impact and the historical importance of Jesus Christ's last moments on the Cross, and reestablishing the traces which brought us salvation through suffering and through the Cross. It's not an easy task, on the contrary, based on the holy apostles testimony in the Gospels we are forced to take into consideration every imaginable aspect of the Cross and its meanings.

First of all we should analyze the etimological meaning of the word "cross" as it appears in the ancient greek language. It is important to know that it had several forms of use, quite different in aspect¹.

It is important to know that in ancient times, punishments often included death sentences, which involved painfull methods of torture leading to the death of the condemned. The fact that the cross was a symbol of torture is not accidental, as we will notice further on. We must observe some interesting aspects regarding the ethymological aspects of the word. For example, When Herodotus uses the verb *anaskolopizein* and *anastauroun*, he undoubtedly makes the distinction necessary regarding semantics, although the two words bear the same meaning, to crucify. *Anaskolopizein* is a more personal verb, reffering only to living persons, while *anastauroun* is used for corpses. In the NT, the verb *stauroun*, is the most frequently used, with emphasis on *stauros* for the cross of Christ. *Skolops* is a variant less used. Both Philo and Josephus are testimony for the use of the verb (*ana*)*stauroun*².

Probably the first use of crucifixion as a method of punishment ever recorder is found among the Persians (*Herodotus Hist.* I. 128.2; III. 132.2, 2, 159.1). The Persians probably derived it from the Assyrian practice of impalement. Later on, the Greeks adopted it and employed it in their methods of punishment. Especially Alexander the Great and the Carthaginians used this method for slaves and non-citizens. Usually, the Romans came into contact with hellenistic culture and it was in the very nature of this cultural contact the practice of crucifixion became adopted into the roman punishment apparatus. We have testimonies that in the OT, blasphemers were "hanged on a tree", as a

¹ "The greek word for cross (*ανασταυρόω* *anastauroid*, *ξύλον* *xylon*, *σταυρός* *stauros*, *συσταυρόω* *systauroid*, lat. *crux*, *crucifigo*, I fasten to a cross) means primarily an upright stake or beam, and secondarily stake used as an instrument for punishment and execution". D. R. W. Wood, & I. H. Marshall, *New Bible dictionary* (3rd edition), Leicester, England, Downers Grove, Ill., InterVarsity Press, 1996, p.245.

² David Noel Freedman, *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, New York, Doubleday, 1996, c1992, S. 1, p.1207.

means of humiliation³. As we can notice, Hellenism was the main vessel through which crucifixion was introduced into Jewish territories, being practiced mainly as a form of cultural contamination. Because of the syncretic nature of the times preceding the birth of Christ, and after His death and Ascension, the adoption of crucifixion by the Jews was obvious. We cannot state precisely the degree of this adoption, but what we can state for certain is that the process was real, especially when the Jews entered under Roman jurisdiction.

It is of utmost importance to know that even if Hellenism was the main element which brought the cross into the realities of Palestine, crucifixion was a form of torture widespread in the ancient world. There are sources which indicate that even in India, Egypt, North Africa and Germany punishment by crucifixion was something usual.

The *Holman treasury of key Bible words* mentions that between 4 B.C. and A.D. 70, the number of people crucified reached at some times into the thousands. This number is not surprising if we take into consideration that most of the capital crimes committed in antiquity were punished by the most horrific deaths ever imagined. The savagery of this method gives us an insight upon the character of that times. From the same source we find that three types of crosses were used as instruments of torture: a cross with the crossbar below the head of the upright bar (Latin cross); a T-shaped cross (St. Anthony's cross); and an X-shaped cross (St. Andrew's cross)⁴.

Regarding the details of the crucifixion itself, the testimonies we have seem to indicate that the torment was unbearable for the average individual, with death frequently occurring immediately after the victim was mounted on the cross. It's not difficult to imagine the psychological trauma which accompanied the tortured one, often leading to heart failure. R.L. Cooper gives us a detailed insight into the moments of crucifixion, enough for us to reflect upon the feelings dwelling into the hearts of the beholders.

Victims of crucifixion did not usually die for two or three days, but this was determined by the presence or absence of the seat and the footrest. A person suspended by his hands lost blood pressure quickly, and the pulse rate was increased. Usually the victim had been severely beaten or flogged before

³ This specific term might be a reference to the cross as mentioned in *Deut.* 21:23. After Hellenistic culture came into Palestine, crucifixion is not specifically mentioned. Antiochus IV Epiphanes was crucifying the Jews who would not accept Hellenization (*Josephus Antt.* XII. 240-41; cf. *1 Macc.* 1:44-50). Josephus states that Alexander Jannaeus executed 800 Pharisean rebels in the town of Bethome (*Josephus BJ I.* 4.6; *Antt.* XIII. 14.2-3). It is thought that the Jewish revolt was precipitated by the crucifixion of 3600 Jews. (A.D. 66; *BJ II.* 14.9) A. C. Myers, *The Eerdmans Bible dictionary*, Grand Rapids, Michigan, Eerdmans, 1987, p. 246.

⁴E. E. Carpenter, & P. W. Comfort, *Holman treasury of key Bible words: 200 Greek and 200 Hebrew words defined and explained*, Nashville, TN Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2000, p. 260.

crucifixion took place. Orthostatic collapse through insufficient blood circulating to the brain and the heart would follow shortly. If the victim could ease his body by supporting himself with the seat and footrest, the blood could be returned to some degree of circulation in the upper part of his body. To fix the hands to the crossbeam, cords or nails were used; sometimes the feet were nailed as well. The nails were about the size of railroad spikes. When it was desired to bring the torture to an end, the victim's legs were broken below the knees with a club. It was then no longer possible for him to ease his weight, and the loss of blood circulation was accentuated. Coronary failure would follow shortly⁵. It is worth mentioning that the legal procedure before the crucifixion itself included, official papers in which the condemned was inventoried⁶.

Speaking of our Lord Jesus Christ's crucifixion, it is mandatory to analyze a little bit the historical personalities which ruled over Palestine in that time, to understand their motivations, their judgments which brought condemnation upon the King of the Jews. **Caesar Tiberius** was the adopted son of Augustus Caesar. His reign began immediately after Augustus's death in 14 A.D., lasting till his own death in 37. His rule was specifically marked by political tensions and discontent among Roman senatorial aristocracy, which were less confident in the abilities of Tiberius to rule, compared to those of the much admired Augustus. The majority of his life was marked by service to Rome. Before becoming emperor, he activated into the military service and administrative positions, being a successful general. He was the one who succeeded in conquering Pannonia and other areas around the Danube. During his reign, Pontius Pilate was appointed procurator of the province Judea, serving him from 26-36. To understand the respect which he gained among the Palestinian rulers, it is sufficient to state that Herod Antipas founded a city, Tiberias in his honor. The main source of information we have regarding Tiberius is Tacitus work, *Annals*⁷.

Herod Antipas, was the son of Herod the Great and the tetrarch of Galilee and Perea (4 B.C. - 39 A.D.). Luke speaks about him, naming him pejoratively "the fox" (*Luke* 13:31-32). The NT mentions him frequently after the simple name Herod. Herod's territories are the places in which most activities of John the Baptist and Jesus Christ took place. (*Matt.* 14:1-12; *Mark* 6:14-29; *Luke* 3:19-20; 9:7-9; *Mark* 8:15; *Luke* 13:31-32; 23:6-16; *Acts* 4:27)⁸. But what was

⁵ R. L. Cooper, *Mark. Holman New Testament Commentary*, 2, Holman Reference, Nashville, TN Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2000, pp. 265–266.

⁶The victim's offense was usually published by a crier who preceded him to the place of execution. Sometimes his crime was written on a tablet that was carried by the condemned man himself. Or if the victim carried the crossbeam, another person carried the tablet before him. The tablet was fixed to the cross at the time of execution. [Ibid.]

⁷D. N. Freedman, A. C. Myers, & A. B. Beck, *Eerdmans dictionary of the Bible*, Grand Rapids, Mich., W.B. Eerdmans, 2000, p.1003.

⁸P. J. Achtemeier, Harper & Row, P., & Society of Biblical Literature, *Harper's Bible dictionary* (1st edition.), San Francisco, Harper & Row, 1986, pp. 386-388.

the most characteristic for Herod Antipas was his evil heart and twisted behaviour⁹.

Pontius Pilate was a typical Roman, not of the antique, simple stamp, but of the imperial period, a man not without some remains of the ancient Roman justice in his soul, yet pleasure-loving, imperious, and corrupt. He hated the Jews whom he ruled, and in times of irritation freely shed their blood. They returned his hatred with cordiality, and accused him of every crime, maladministration, cruelty, and robbery. He visited Jerusalem as seldom as possible; for, indeed, to one accustomed to the pleasures of Rome, with its theatres, baths, games, and gay society, Jerusalem, with its religiousness and ever-smouldering revolt, was a dreary residence. When he did visit it he stayed in the palace of Herod the Great, it being common for the officers sent by Rome into conquered countries to occupy the palaces of the displaced sovereigns¹⁰. Pilate played the main role in the trial of Jesus Christ, being the one who washed his hands when the Lord was condemned to be crucified.

For His contemporaries, Jesus Christ, the Son of Man, was no doubt the most stunning, influential and inspiring character mankind has ever witnessed. The impact which Jesus left throughout His life in Palestine was tremendous, forever marking the lives of those who followed Him and tried to apply His teachings into their lives. The fact that Jesus is found guilty of blasphemy and condemned to the most terrible death ever conceived, surprises us and at the same time when trying to relive the process of crucifixion itself, we are facing the most difficult task possible, asking ourselves, what where the witnesses thinking, what feelings did they have, how did their lives could go on after The Son of God was killed on the cross in terrible pain. Of course, for the apostles it was certain that Jesus promised them that He will return in glory to bring the Kingdom of Heaven and to give them eternal life.

Besides the crucifixion itself, although the testimony of the gospels are very brief in giving us details about the whole trial and death of Jesus, it is most certain that our Lord was condemned to bear the whole suffering brought by the instruments of torture reserved for the lower people.

It is striking that none of the Gospel accounts provides any description of the actual crucifixion. There is likely a number of reasons for this: (a) in the world for which the Gospels were written this barbaric punishment was well

⁹ To better understand the wicked character of Herod, we find out that he married with his niece, married with his half-brother Herod, and by doing this he divorced a daughter of Aretas, king of Nabateans. Because of this ungodly act, Herod was criticized by John the Baptist, this critique being also the bearer of John's decapitation (*Matt.* 14:1-12; *Mark* 6:14-29; *Luke* 3:19-20; 9:7-9). The apostle Luke mentions Herod as playing an important role in the trial of Jesus Christ (*Luke* 23:6-16; *Acts* 4:27) [*Ibid.*].

¹⁰ M. Easton, *Easton's Bible dictionary*, Oak Harbor, WA Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1996, p.990.

known, and the mere mention of it would evoke powerful images; (b) given the limited descriptions in the secular sources and the tenor of some comments, it would seem that educated Romans considered the subject so unsavoury as to be avoided as much as possible in conversation; (c) the one who had been crucified in this case was the beloved Lord, so to dwell on his agony on the cross felt wrong; and (d) the focus of interest of the Gospel accounts is not on the crucifixion as such, except as having happened, but on the larger pattern of significance within which the crucifixion finds its place¹¹.

More specifically the, New Testament references on Jesus's crucifixion are *Matt. 27:32-44*, *Luke 23:33-43*, *John 19:16-30*, *Mark 15:21-26*.

If the educated romans considered Jesus Christ a mere slave or a blasphemer, no doubt that His crucifixion meant nothing more than the crucifixion of every other villain in the province. Jesus's claim that He is the Son of Man who came into the world to forgive mankind of its sin, meant so little for the Pantheon gods worshippers. Nolland's claim that Jesus being the Lord Himself would be enough not to dwell to much on His death and crucifixion is partly acceptable, because His disciples and followers had His words and the promise of resurrection written on their hearts. So, beside the feeling of uselessness and suffering which the sight of crucifixion might have brought into the hearts of the witnessess, Nolland's claim is perfectly possible in the context of absolute belief into the coming Ressurrection.

Before the Cross, Jesus would have probably been flogged to inflict as much pain as possible. Flogging was the main means of inflicting as much pain as possible, preceding the execution of a capital punishment. The prisoner was stripped, beaten on the back by several guards using short leather whips, studded with sharp pieces of bone or metal. The most shocking fact is that there was no limit on the number of blows inflicted. John tells us that even after Jesus was beaten and flogged to death, they still wanted to see Him crucified (*John 19:1-7*)¹². The crucified one was meant to bear as much suffering as possible being elevated on the cross, for the final moments of his life. Such being the case, torture was inflicted in a variety of ways meant to induce fear and obedience into the hearts of the people.

In describing this sad scene, no less than five forms of beating are mentioned by the Evangelists Matthew and Mark and Luke. The latter has "(1) δέροντες, properly to skin or flay, and then beat severely; (2) ἔτυπτον, imperfect, they kept smiting him; (3) παίσεις, to inflict blows or strike with violence; St. Matthew has (4) ἔκολάφισαν, they buffeted with clenched fist; and (5) ἔρράπισαν, they struck with open palms or rods; while St. Mark has ῥαπίσμασιν

¹¹ J. Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek text*. Grand Rapids, Mich., Carlisle, W.B. Eerdmans, Paternoster Press, 2005, pp. 1191–1192.

¹² J. F. Walvoord, R. B. Zuck, & Dallas Theological Seminary, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, Wheaton, IL, Victor Books, 1983, p.459.

... ἔβαλλον, they received him with blows of the hands or strokes of rods. It was on this occasion they did spit in his face and blindfold him, derisively bidding him “prophesy, who is it that smote thee?” with many other vilifications, in some or all of which the members of the council, as well as the menials of the court, took part. We now hasten from such a disgraceful scene – from the scornful spitting, the shameful scoffing, the savage smiting, the ribald revilings, the shocking cruelties, and the savage barbarities of the miscreants of the Sanhedrim – and pass on to his treatment by Herod¹³.

As M. Silva infers, crucifixion was the lowest form of treatment a human being could ever witness, and as such, the fact that our Lord Jesus Christ was meant to bear this stigma, inspire us with awe and divine grace¹⁴.

Because Jesus Christ was called the King of Jews, He instilled fear and illogical behaviour into the mind of the rulers in Palestine. For a man to claim that He is the true son of God who came into the world to establish the Kingdom of Heaven was mindshattering for the political authorities, both roman and jewish. After beating and flogging Him, the soldiers of Pilate crown Him with thorn twigs (*Matt. 27:29*). The crowning with the twigs was not meant by Pilate to inflict pain, but most probably to humiliated the One who was called King of the Jews. The supposed plant used was the thorny nabk, which grew abundantly about Jerusalem. Its branches could easily be platted into the form of a crown¹⁵.

The humiliation and suffering which Jesus Christ endured until His final breath on the Cross, was nothing else than the entire suffering brought by humankind’s sin, and which He had erased through His atonement on the Cross. For His contemporaries, even for the apostles, this holy mission was not only very hard to understand, but was also very frightening in the good sense of the word. With all this in mind, the apostle Mark’s testimony is very scarce in giving us details. Mark does not focus on the suffering brought by the crucifixion, his intentions being much more subtle. Mark’s record of the action of crucifixion is economical but powerful. The focus is not so much on the physical suffering involved (though Mark’s readers would have been well enough aware of what σταυροῦσιν αὐτόν meant without having it spelled out for them) as on the verbal abuse of Jesus both through the mocking placard on the cross and through the remarks of the various bystanders and

¹³*The Pulpit Commentary: St. Mark, 2nd volume, 2004, H. D. M. Spence-Jones, Bellingham, WA, Logos Research Systems, Inc, 2004, pp. 333–340.*

¹⁴Death by crucifixion was the most degrading forms of torture ever conceived, as stated by M. Silva, the fact that the Son of God is crucified, is means of kenosis meant to instill in the minds of His followers that He is the true Son of God. Silva, M., *Philippians* (2nd edition). Baker exegetical commentary on the New Testament, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005, p. 107.

¹⁵ The impact which the humiliating crowning may have had upon the spectators must have been incredible. All the hopes of the apostles and of Jesus’s followers may have been shattered during this horrific sight. But of course, they still believed that this Man, which endured suffering for man kind’s sin, is the Son of God. M. Easton, *Easton’s Bible*, p. 760.

even his fellow victims¹⁶. The place of the crucifixion must have had the character of death itself, mainly to inflict terror into the beholders. Thus Golgotha, a place which is by all means a symbol of death, becomes a symbol of Christ's death. The name, defined by the Gospel writers as "the place of a skull" (*Matt.* 27:33; *Mark* 15:22; *John* 19:17; cf. *Luke* 23:33; KJV "Calvary"), is the Greek transliteration of Aram. *Golgotha*, "skull" (cf. Vulg. Lat. *Calvaria*, whence Eng. "Calvary"). According to Origen, Golgotha was named after the skull of Adam, who was allegedly buried there. It is more likely that the name derived from a rocky protuberance located there that had the shape of a skull, but other explanations have also been given¹⁷. The crucifixion and the death of Christ was understood as a cosmic event, because of the unusual phenomena which took place on Golgotha. Because Christ was the Son of Man, his death would mean the abolishing of death and such it must have been accompanied by terrific signs.

At his crucifixion the sun was darkened; the stars appeared, and in all the world people lighted lamps from the sixth hour till evening; the moon appeared like blood, and the stars and Orion lamented at the sin of the Jews. (The other recension says that Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, the twelve patriarchs, and Moses and Job, who were seen by the Jews, and many others 'whom I, too, saw', appeared in the body and thus lamented)¹⁸.

The significance of Christ's death on the Cross for his contemporaries and especially for the coming generations was tremendous. Not only that it brought the certitude of the Kingdom of Heaven and the death of sin, but also it brought the certitude that mankind was not alone in its struggle with suffering and injustice. The testimony left by the holy apostles makes us aware that His crucifixion was a symbol of our own selves, because for the believers, Jesus Christ is one whole body, the body of humankind. Thus all the scriptural references we find regarding to the meaning of Christ's crucifixion are meant to strenghten our faith.

¹⁶ "The irony which we noted in the previous scene continues to run strongly through these verses, both in the association of Jesus as βασιλεὺς τῶν Ἰουδαίων with two convicted ληστῆς and as the reader reflects on the titles of honour which, perverted into sarcastic abuse by Jesus' enemies, nonetheless continue to point to the true nature of his mission as king (Messiah), replacer of the temple, and saviour. His enemies' call to come down from the cross sharply reminds us that it is precisely in order to fulfil these functions that he is there and must remain until the sacrifice he has spoken of at the Passover meal is completed, and his life has been given as a λύτρον ἀντὶ πολλῶν." R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark: A commentary on the Greek text*, Grand Rapids, Mich. Carlisle W.B. Eerdmans, Paternoster Press, 2002, pp. 639–640.

¹⁷ A. C. Myers, *The Eerdmans Bible dictionary*, Grand Rapids, Mich. Eerdmans, 1987, p. 404.

¹⁸ M. R. James, *The apocryphal New Testament: Being the Apocryphal Gospels, Acts, Epistles, and Apocalypses*, Bellingham, WA Logos Research Systems, Inc, 2009, p.104.

Besides this the cross is nothing more than an intermediary between the godly kingdom and the earthly one. Even the form of the cross makes us think as something global, something holy, makes us realize that the cross is a synthesis, between God and mankind, as Jesus was both real human and real God.

Here are the most remarkable New Testament texts related to the cross: Lest the cross of Christ be nullified (*1 Cor.* 1:17); we preach Christ crucified (*1 Cor.* 1:23); I decided to know nothing except Jesus Christ and him crucified (*1 Cor.* 2:2); he was crucified in weakness (*2 Cor.* 13:4); Jesus Christ was placarded as crucified (*Gal.* 3:1); he became obedient to death, even death on a cross (*Phil.* 2:8); having made peace through the blood of his cross (*Col.* 1:20); they crucify the Son of God afresh and put him to shame (*Heb.* 6:6); the city where their Lord was crucified (*Rev.* 11:8); our bill of debt was nailed to the cross (*Col.* 2:14); he bore our sins in his own body on the tree (*1 Pet.* 2:24); reconciled to God through the cross (*Eph.* 2:16); no boasting except in the cross (*Gal.* 6:14); the world has been crucified to me and I to the world (*Gal.* 6:14); the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing (*1 Cor.* 1:18); the stumbling block of the cross (*Gal.* 5:11); that they may not be persecuted for the cross of Christ (*Gal.* 6:12); enemies of the cross of Christ (*Phil.* 3:18)¹⁹.

Through the cross, the people who witnessed His crucifixion, bear with Him the pain and the suffering of mankind, they follow Him, because He is the source of Light, the Author of salvation, and they probably believed, as we do today, that what Christ is, we Christians shall be, if we imitate Christ²⁰.

¹⁹ C. A. Day, *Collins Thesaurus of the Bible*. Bellingham, WA, Logos Research Systems, Inc., p.209.

²⁰A. Roberts, J. Donaldson, & A. C. Coxe, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* Vth volume: *Translations of the writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325*, Oak Harbor Logos Research Systems, 1997, pp. 468–469.

