

## The Crucifixion of Jesus

Crucifixion was a horrible means of execution that the Romans learned from the Carthaginians. Part of the punishment was the burden of carrying the cross or the crossbeam through the city. The ordeal so exhausted Jesus that another person had to carry it to Golgotha (Mk 15:22).

The arms were nailed to the crossbeam, not through the palms, but through the wrist bones. Often a block of wood to support the body and another to support the feet were attached. Israeli archaeologists recently found in an ossuary dating from the first century AD a heel-bone pierced with a seven-inch nail — the first such physical evidence of crucifixion to be found. Since the soldiers were able to offer Jesus a sponge soaked in *posca*, their cheap vinegar-wine, the cross must not have been very high.

One writer has vividly described the terrible cruelty of the cross. It represented the climax of torture. Physical suffering was great, and it went on for a long time. It was shameful. Crowds gathered to witness the long agony. We cannot even say that the crucified person writhed in agony, for it was impossible for him to move. Some of the weight of the body could be taken on the legs, but not once the legs were broken. The victim was stripped of clothing, and unable even to brush away the flies that landed on his wounded flesh, already lacerated by the preliminary scourging. He was exposed to the insults and curses of people who can always find some sickening pleasure in the sight of others' tortures. The cross displayed miserable humanity reduced to the last degree of weakness, suffering, and degradation.

Paul wrote in 1 Cor 1:23: "*We preach a crucified Christ. To the Jews this is a stumbling block and to the Greeks it is foolishness.*" The Jews did not perceive the death of the Messiah as an expiatory atonement in terms of Isaiah 53. The ancient synagogue did not expect that the Messiah would die. The Jewish Talmud and another Jewish writing describe Jesus' death as an execution that He deserved, because they say He led Israel astray by sorcery.

To the Romans, crucifixion was a frightful death reserved for slaves and rebels. Roman citizens were exempt. They treated Roman citizens more mercifully, by executing them with the sword. Cicero said, "Even the mere word 'cross' must remain far, not only from the lips of the citizens of Rome, but also from their thoughts, their eyes, and their ears."

How scandalous it was, then, to hear of a "mischievous superstition", as the pagan Roman historian Tacitus calls Christianity, that involved worship of a criminal executed on a cross! There is a crude graffito on the wall of a palace on the Palatine hill in Rome, dating from the end of the second century, which depicts a young man adoring a crucified man with the head of a donkey. The apologist Marcus Minucius Felix (third century) reports the sentiments of a pagan concerning the cross:

Again, to say that a man who had suffered capital punishment for a crime and the death-dealing wood of the cross are objects of their veneration, is to assign fitting altars to abandoned wretches, and to assert that they worship what they deserve to worship.

How, then, did the cross become the symbol of Christianity, a movement that infiltrated and eventually captured the Roman Empire? How could the Christians have elevated a symbol that was as notorious as the gibbet or gallows into an emblem of triumph? Would the death of a political messiah have converted a fanatical enemy like Saul of Tarsus? Would the change in the life of a harmless "normal" Pharisee have inspired the conversion of sceptical pagans to the degree that they willingly, even joyously, risked martyrdom for their faith?

Surely the only thing that can explain the rise and the spread of Christianity is the assured conviction of the early disciples that their Master had risen from the tomb. It demonstrated His Oneness with the Father — a conviction that was confirmed by the transformation of their lives through the power of His resurrection!

[Adapted from an article, "Historical Notes on the Trial and Crucifixion of Jesus Christ", by Edwin M Yamauchi, in *Christianity Today*, 9 April, 1971) p.10-11.