



“Crucifixion was a punishment in which the caprice and sadism of the executioners was given full rein.”

A decorative white frame with ornate scrollwork and a dotted border, enclosing the title text.

THE PRACTICE OF
**Roman
Crucifixion**

By R. D. Fowler

“What should I do then with Jesus, who is called Messiah?” They all answered, ‘Crucify Him!’ Then he [Pilate] said, ‘Why? What has He done wrong?’ But they kept shouting, ‘Crucify Him!’ all the more” (Matt. 27:22-23, HCSB).

WHEN I READ OR HEAR THOSE words, I get emotional. Watching a reenactment brings tears to my eyes. Yet what I hear or envision does not sufficiently reflect the horror of what really happened. What I hear, and what you likely hear as well, is an angry crowd yelling, “Put Him to death!” When we consider Jesus was not a criminal and that Pilate admitted he could not find Him guilty of any crime, we conclude the act was a travesty.¹

Crucifixion was the most cruel, abominable, inhumane form of execution man ever conceived. By design, crucifixion inflicted on the condemned person the harshest and greatest amount of suffering imaginable—prior to his death. It also exposed the person to the greatest possible degree of indignity after his death.

History

The precursor to crucifixion was impalement. The Greek word translated “cross” in the New Testament, *stauros*, originally referred to a pointed wooden stake or pole firmly fixed in the ground. Walls of these stakes formed protective palisade fortifications around settlements. Eastern countries, particularly Assyria, developed the practice of publicly displaying the corpses or heads of criminals, traitors, and enemies on these walls as a means of humiliation and intimidation.² This practice led to people using the stakes themselves as a means of torture and execution—by impaling offenders on the stake and leaving them to die.³

History does not indicate when impalement ceased and crucifixion began, but historians generally agree that crucifixion began among the Persians.⁴ The Romans likely adopted it from the Carthaginians.⁵ Many ancient texts refer to both impalement and crucifixion but often fail to distinguish between the two and provide little descriptive detail of crucifixion.

The Greeks and Romans used crucifixion well before the time of Christ. Alexander the Great used it in the fourth century B.C. As early as 250 B.C., the Romans were crucifying those they considered deserving. The ancient Romans generally thought of crucifixion as “the slave’s punishment.” Over time, however, the Romans used it for slaves, thieves, insurgents, and enemies of the Empire in general.

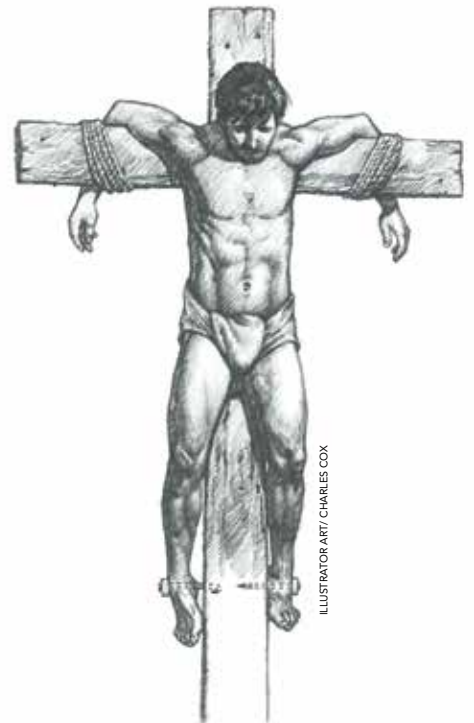
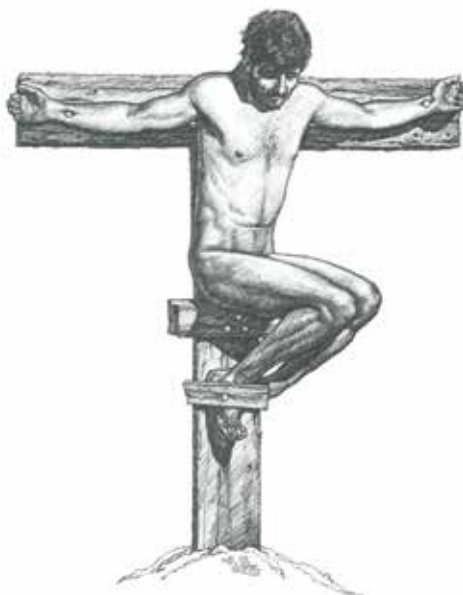
People never considered crucifixion to be a Jewish form of punishment; yet Alexander Jannaeus, a Jewish high priest and king who crucified 800 Pharisees in

Below: Artist’s renderings of first-century crucifixions. A St. Anthony’s cross is on the left and a Latin Cross on the right. The St. Anthony’s has a small wooden block seat.



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO; BRITISH MUSEUM, LONDON (3/17945)

ASSYRIAN RELIEF from Nineveh’s South-West Palace shows captives being impaled. The Assyrians impaled either under a person’s rib cage or between his legs. The bodies were put on display as a deterrent to others and to emphasize the brutality of the Assyrian army.



ILLUSTRATOR ART/ CHARLES COX

Roman-Era ruins beside the Mediterranean Sea at Carthage in northern Africa. The Romans likely adopted the practice of crucifying from the Carthaginians.



ISTOCK PHOTO

Left: Bust of Rome's Emperor Titus, who ruled A.D. 79-81. Before he became emperor of Rome, Titus

distinguished himself as a military commander. One of his campaigns included sacking Jerusalem and crucifying thousands of Jews.

Method

Martin Hengel, professor of New Testament and early Judaism, explained, "crucifixion was a punishment in which the caprice and sadism of the executioners was given full rein."⁶ Scourging was the first brutal act related to crucifixion. Roman citizens, though, were exempt from this part of the punishment. The condemned person was stripped of clothing, tied to a post, and beaten with the dreaded Roman flagellum, a whip consisting of leather straps embedded with metal, bone, or rock. Scourging was designed to shred flesh, in some cases exposing both bones and internal organs. Roman law, unlike Jewish law, set no limits on the number of lashes a person could receive. The severity of the scourging was completely at the discretion of the person administering it. In some cases, the scourging caused death; in others, it expedited death. In most cases, though, the scourging merely increased the agony the condemned person experienced on the cross.

Following scourging, the condemned person was clothed and then forced to carry the horizontal beam (Latin, *patibulum*) to the crucifixion site.⁷ Typically the Romans hung a sign around the criminal's neck, specifying his offense. At the crucifixion site the person was again stripped of their clothing and placed on the cross. The sign was then placed on the cross. Scripture does not

one day, used it in the first century B.C. as an act of revenge for the Pharisees' rebellion against him. By the first century A.D., Rome used crucifixion extensively in the pacification of Judea. Romans also used it throughout the Empire as a means of maintaining order and suppressing insurrection. While crucifixion was primarily limited to non-citizens, Roman citizens were not totally free from its terrible shadow. In certain cases, particularly treason, Caesar would issue an edict allowing authorities to crucify even Roman citizens.

Crucifixion took place in public areas outside the city walls—where the bodies were clearly visible. Crucifixion thus punished offenders and intimidated one's enemies. Bodies on crosses were a common sight in the first century A.D. The number of people crucified reached into the thousands. This excessive usage along with its barbaric nature and the religious idea of being cursed made crucifixion particularly offensive to the Jews (see Deut. 21:22-23).

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Left: Courtyard of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem.

Below: Dated to about 300 B.C. and from Athens, Greece, marble bust of Alexander

the Great; he wears the lion's pelt, which hints that he was a descendent of the mythical hero Herakles. The letters on the face were carved much later.



decay. We know from Scripture this was not the case with Jesus.

My belief is that soldiers nailed Jesus to the horizontal beam (the *patibulum*) and then pulled Him and the *patibulum* up the vertical beam, the *stipes*, forming a Latin cross.⁸

There, He died.

This barbaric punishment method continued until the fourth century. Emperor Constantine, who had converted to Christianity, abolished crucifixion during the later years of his reign. While many details are unclear, one detail is indisputable; crucifixion brought extreme suffering. The tremendous loss of blood, the excruciating pain from the nails, the stretched position, and the exposure to the elements all contributed to extreme suffering prior to death.⁹ ❖

mention Jesus wearing the sign Pilate made; however, custom dictated that He likely did.

Upon arrival at the site, the authorities would secure the person to the cross using ropes, nails—or both. We know Jesus was nailed to His cross; not discounting the theological significance, nothing suggests otherwise. At this point in the process, details vary about how the actual crucifixion took place. Some believe the person was secured to the cross as it lay on the ground; the entire cross was then lifted up and dropped into a hole prepared for it. Others suggest the vertical beam (the *stipes*) was already in the ground; soldiers attached the person to the *patibulum* and hoisted both up the vertical beam.

Although the Romans had no standard form for the crosses they used, at least four variations were prominent. The Latin cross, likely the form on which Jesus died, had a cross beam that attached a little below the top of the vertical beam. The second form, a St. Anthony's cross, looked like a capital T. The third design, the Greek cross, had equal beams and looked like a plus sign. The fourth configuration, the St. Andrews cross, looked like the letter X. The variation in crosses, the possibility that crosses could be reused, and the absence of specific details mean that the method of crucifixion could vary—depending on the circumstances and the type of cross. The Latin, the St. Anthony's, and the Greek cross each had a small wooden block or seat. This supported the body and prolonged death. Later, after the first century, a footrest was added. After death, bodies were, as a rule, left on the cross to be exposed to the elements and to

1. Leon Morris in his commentary, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 705, contends Matthew's repeated use of the phrase "crucify Him" indicates the crowd's awareness of the reprehensible nature of this form of punishment.

2. The Philistines did this with King Saul's body (1 Sam. 31:8-15).

3. See D. G. Burke, "Cross" in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, gen. ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 825-26. This understanding of the Greek word has led some cult groups to deny that Jesus was hung on a cross and to teach instead that He was impaled on a "torture stake."

4. *Ibid.*, 828.

5. Martin Hengel, *Crucifixion*, trans. John Bowden (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977), 23. Many consider Hengel's book to be the most authoritative on the subject.

6. *Ibid.*, 25.

7. Images often depict Jesus carrying the entire cross; however, the weight of both beams would have been close to 300 pounds, making this highly unlikely. The cross beam itself was quite heavy; carrying it would have been difficult, especially for someone who had been scourged (see Matt. 27:32).

8. One cannot be dogmatic about which method was used. While few descriptive accounts of crucifixion from the Roman Era remain, the New Testament provides us the most detailed accounts of crucifixion—and even those are not specific on this point.

9. For a more detailed description of crucifixion, including a medical explanation of Jesus' suffering and death, see William D. Edwards, Wesley J. Gabel, and Floyd E. Hosmer, "On the Physical Death of Jesus Christ," *Journal of the American Medical Association* vol. 255, no. 11 (March 21, 1986):1455-63.

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