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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.

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.

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. 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.

History does not indicate when impalement ceased and crucifixion began, but historians generally agree that crucifixion began among the Persians. The Romans likely adopted it from the Carthaginians. 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 Janneus, a Jewish high priest and king who crucified 800 Pharisees in

Assyrian relief from Nineveh’s Southwest 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.
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.” 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. 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
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. 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.

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 lead 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.
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.

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