

INTRODUCTION

Crucifixion was considered by the ancients to be one of the worst forms of execution. Cicero said, "Crucifixion is indeed one of the most abominable torments that the very inventive genius of torture has imagined. Perhaps it even holds the first place, as the cruelest and most hideous of torments." Therefore it is significant that this most vicious means of venting man's cruelty to man should today be associated with the fullest display of God's love to man in history. The only rationale for undertaking a study of a subject which would ordinarily shock the senses, is that the beauty of God's love is seen best set against the ugliness of man's depravity. If we understand what our Savior endured when He was crucified, we will have a greater appreciation of the work He accomplished through His death.

Origin of Crucifixion as a Method of Execution.

The historical beginnings of the use of crucifixion as a method of execution are as misty as the motives of the men who invented it. This is due partly to imprecision as to what constituted "crucifixion" in the distant past. Most fundamentally, the idea of crucifixion is associated with the piercing of a condemned person by one or more sharpened objects so as to bring about slow death. Some have postulated that this practice originated in the hesitancy of primitive peoples to actively bring about death, but to allow nature to take its course by keeping the person from defense or from flight from animals of prey. (Mattingly, p. 7) Later peoples cast off such qualms and experimented with variations in the degree and location of piercing until the practice became almost ritualistic in Roman times.

Crucifixion was generally eastern in origin, but the dubious distinction of being associated with the first large-scale use of this form of execution belongs to the Persians. Preference for crucifixion may have developed there because the ground in Persia was consecrated to their god Ormuzd and crucifixion kept a person off the ground, preventing its defilement. (Blinzler, The Trial of Jesus, p. 246) We learn of Persia's practice because of the boast of Darius I on the Behistun Inscription that he had crucified 3000 leaders of the rebellions. From Persia, the practice of crucifixion degenerated into less of a religious expediency than an exercise in cruelty. Phoenicia, famed for its barbaric practices, frequently practiced crucifixion, as did the Greeks in the Macedonian period (when they had lost their pride in and admiration for the human body exhibited by the ancient athletic games and works of art).

The same callousness toward human suffering which developed among the Greeks as they were influenced by more barbaric races, also developed among the Romans. Crucifixion was not known in the early days of Rome but in the later days of expansion, "depraved by conquest and brutalized by magnificence" (Fairbairn, Studies in the Life of Christ, p. 309) Rome developed the practice to the place that it became one of the most common means of punishment--being used widely in Rome as well as in her provinces. (Mattingly, p. 11) Rome evidently borrowed crucifixion from her bitter enemy Carthage, since it is first attested as a Roman penalty in the Punic

Wars. (Oxford Class. Dict., p. 300) The extent of Rome's use of crucifixion staggers the imagination: Crassus crucified 6000 slaves (lining the Appian Way from Capua to Rome) after Spartacus' rebellion, Augustus Caesar crucified 6000 slaves in Sicily to suppress a war, the Maccabean king Alexander I crucified 800 Jews after capturing the rebellious city of Bethomo, and during the last seige on Jerusalem in 70 A.D., Titus crucified 500 people a day for some time. Josephus comments on the last example that "their multitude was so great that room was wanting for the crosses, and crosses wanting for the bodies." (Whiston p. 800) Eventually, even the prohibitions against crucifying Roman citizens were abrogated and all but the most privileged could expect crucifixion for serious crime.

Such is the background of the institution of crucifixion as a capital penalty up to the time of Jesus Christ. Crucifixion was eventually abolished, under Constantine, but only as the result of the ministry of the One who by being crucified made it possible to change depraved human hearts.

Equipment Used in Crucifixion.

Since the primary object of our study is to aid in the interpretation of the Gospels, only the Roman method of crucifixion will be discussed in technical detail.

The scourge was the first implement legally associated with crucifixion. Known in the Latin as the flagrum, it consisted of a short handle to which was attached several long thongs of varying length, bearing jagged and sharp pieces of bone and lead. Sometimes a long solid rod was used instead. (Mattingly, p. 15)

The wood of the "cross" was usually acacia, olive, or cypress and consisted of at least two pieces. These pieces were either put together in the shape of a T (crux commissa) or the more traditional dagger (t-crux immissa). The vertical piece (stipes crucis) was not very heavy--only strong enough to support the body of the victim. Its height varied between seven to ten feet depending on whether or not prominent display was a prime objective in the execution. Some accounts say that these vertical pieces were left in place and used repeatedly, while others describe the cross as being destroyed after the body was removed. This procedure may have varied according to era, since in early Roman procedure the bodies remained upon the cross until they rotted and fell off, or were eaten up by vultures. In Cicero's time this practice had declined, so that friends could obtain permission to remove and bury the corpse. (CBQ p. 157) The horizontal crosspiece (pati-bulum) was approximately three inches deep, five inches wide, and six feet long, weighing thirty pounds. (Bishop, p. 300) This was the piece carried to the place of execution by the condemned. In the bottom of the crosspiece was a slot so that it would fit over or into the upright piece when the prisoner was raised and set in place. (Bishop, p. 300) When in this position the two pieces would be nailed together with spikes.

The final pieces of equipment used in crucifixion were the ropes or (more commonly) nails used to affix the condemned to the cross. The nails were approximately seven inches long, with a head or expanded portion to keep the body from sliding off.

Procedure in Crucifixion.

The instruments used in crucifixion were composed of ordinary substances, but wielded by men with depraved hearts and calloused feelings, they became part of a procedure calculated to produce exquisite pain, (mental as well as physical). After scourging, which usually took place at the tribunal of judgment, the prisoner was led through the busiest thoroughfares on his way to the place of execution. This place of execution was as public as possible, in a street or elevated place, so that the full impact of the punishment could be felt by the populace.

Each man carried his own crosspiece to the crucifixion site. The condemned men's hands were bound together with rope, which permitted a distance of about six inches between each hand. As the crossbeam was placed on the right shoulder, the two hands curled over opposite sides of the beam, which jutted about thirty inches in front of the condemned and about forty-two inches behind him, diagonally to the left. If, during the trip to crucifixion, a prisoner's hands slipped off the beam because of exhaustion or the effects of shock, the short rope between wrists kept it from sliding to the street in front of the soldiers marching behind. (Bishop. p. 300)

Once at the crucifixion site, each prisoner was held on his back by soldiers and his arms stretched out on the crosspiece. The executioner wore an apron with pockets, and would select one of the square cut nails and probe for the proper spot to nail it. Some dispute nailing into the hands because of evidence for acute hemorrhage and quick death from lacerations of its major blood vessels. (Expository Times, p. 148) If such is true, it would work against the purpose of crucifixion--prolonged agony. Many say the executioner nailed into the wrist, through the little hollow spot behind where the so-called lifeline ends. (Bishop, p. 311) whatever the location, nails were certainly in use as the practice of crucifixion developed, because the Romans learned that binding by rope did not sap the strength of the condemned man soon enough to prevent escape, and the interest of observers waned quickly anyway.

Once nailed to the crosspiece, the prisoner and beam would be lifted up by ladders and forked poles called furcillae and, the beam fitted into the socket or groove of the upright. (CEQ, p. 157) The next procedure was to nail the feet to the upright beam, usually right foot over the left. Ordinarily, the legs would be pressed together, bent, and twisted so that the calves were parallel to the crossbeam. Then a single nail would be inserted through the achilles tendon. If the legs were not twisted, the nail would go through the front of the foot, into the instep and sole. The feet were not pulled downward and nailed to the foot of the cross because then the prisoner always died too quickly, from asphyxiation. Over the years, the Romans learned to push the feet upward

on the cross so that the condemned man could lean on the nails and stretch himself upward momentarily in order to breathe better. When the prisoner's feet had been nailed the process of crucifixion was complete, and the condemned person looked forward to a slow, agonizing death accompanied by the stares and sneers of those who passed by.

Effects of Crucifixion Upon the Body.

One of the prime purposes of crucifixion as a method of execution was to inflict the greatest amount of pain and suffering upon the condemned, for the longest possible time before death. Since death rarely came to the sufferer sooner than thirty-six hours after crucifixion (and most men lasted two or three days) this objective was often achieved.

The first effect of crucifixion upon the body was an insatiable thirst, created by exposure to the hot and scorching heat of the sun as well as by the loss of fluids through scourge wounds and the excessive perspiration accompanying intense fear. Added to this discomfort was the obvious pain from scourging and nail wounds. Finally, contortion of the body's muscles produced spasmodic cramps (tetanization) and rigid cramps especially in the pectoral region. These would eventually permeate the diaphragm and lungs so as to prohibit breathing. The only relief from such a condition was at best temporary. By momentarily ignoring the increased pain in the feet, a person could raise themselves higher on the cross by using the bottom nail, pressing against the instep until the shoulders were on a level with the hands. Once out of the usual "V" position, breathing would be more rapid and easier.

The cumulative effect of such torture upon the body is graphically described by Farrar (The Life of Christ, p. 440)

For indeed a death by crucifixion seems to include all that pain and death can have of horrible and ghastly--dizziness, cramp, thirst, starvation, sleeplessness, traumatic fever, tetanus, shame, publicity of shame, long continuance of torment, horror of anticipation, mortification of untended wounds--all intensified just up to the point at which they can be endured at all, but all stopping just short of the point which would give to the sufferer the relief of unconsciousness. The unnatural position made every movement painful; the lacerated veins and crushed tendons throbbed with incessant anguish; the wounds, inflamed by exposure, gradually gangrened; the arteries--especially at the head and stomach--became swollen and oppressed with surcharged blood; and while each variety of misery went on gradually increasing, there was added to them the intolerable pang of a burning and raging thirst; and all these physical complications caused an internal excitement and anxiety, which made the prospect of death itself--of death, the unknown enemy, at whose approach man usually shudders most--bear the aspect of a delicious and exquisite release.

Under Roman law, sympathy toward an accused person was permitted, but sympathy toward one condemned was forbidden. However, often an allowance

was made for a society of charitable women in Jerusalem (called the chaburat in) to fulfill the prescriptions of Proverbs 31:6-7 ("Give strong drink unto him that is ready to perish, and wine unto the bitter in soul: let him drink and forget his poverty, and remember his misery no more!") Talmudic tradition says that these high-placed ladies gave an intoxicating drink to the condemned before execution to make them insensitive to the pain. There was also a widespread belief in the East that a man in torment died as soon as he had a drink, so their motivation may also have been to hasten death. This strong drink usually consisted of wine mixed with myrrh or incense. (Oxford Classical Dict., p. 91)

Under the weight of the suffering produced by crucifixion, the body of the condemned person finally gave up struggling and expired.

Motivation for the Use of Crucifixion as a Means of Execution.

Reville describes crucifixion as follows:

Nothing so terrifying as the sight of that body alive, breathing, seeing, hearing, still feeling yet reduced to the condition of a corpse by forced immobility and absolute powerlessness. It cannot even be said that the victim writhed in his pain, it was impossible for him to writhe. Stripped of all his clothing, unable to beat off the flies which swarmed over his skin lacerated by the preliminary scourging, no longer capable of retaining the repulsive excreta, a butt to insults...the cross exhibited the wretched human being reduced to the last extremity of impotence, suffering, and degradation. Torture, public exhibition, degradation, certain death, but a death distilled out drop by drop--crucifixion embodied all that could be desired. It was the ideal torment.

What possible motivation could drive men to inflict such a punishment as crucifixion upon other men? The first to be mentioned is as old as sin itself--the desire to see another person suffer for his wrongdoing and thus satisfy our thirst for vengeance. The Roman state retaliated against its "enemies" with a ferocity that has seldom been equalled. The second possible motivation is judicial--the Roman state wished its subjects to so fear the consequences of a serious crime that they would be reluctant to commit it. Such a concern explains the public nature of crucifixion as a method of execution--it provided an example to all of what would happen to those who disregarded Roman Law. Finally, the "predeterminate counsel and foreknowledge of God" (Acts 2:23) was at work behind the historical development of crucifixion as a means of execution because so many of the Messianic prophecies alluded to a death by crucifixion (although this was unrecognized by the original writers). These prophecies needed to be fulfilled literally. Therefore the development of crucifixion displays another instance where the "wrath of men" is made to praise God.

The Significance of Understanding Crucifixion in Interpreting the New Testament.

The cross of Jesus Christ stands at the dividing point of history as a reference point by which to give history meaning. What was accomplished there by the God-Man in actual time and space has eternal repercussions for all men. Therefore, an appreciation of what was physically involved (to some degree) in such a spiritual transaction can only heighten the vividness of the event. Granted, Christ's sufferings on the cross went beyond that of others crucified because He was paying the penalty of the sin of the world, but the medium through which God ordained to channel His righteous wrath was the death of crucifixion. Whenever therefore, the New Testament refers to the cross literally or figuratively, a knowledge commensurate with the knowledge of the original readers concerning the cross will aid in our interpretation. It is hoped that the knowledge gained by reading this paper will contribute toward that goal, for "the preaching of the cross is...the power of God" (I Cor. 1:18).

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See A. Anderson Dec 1973