

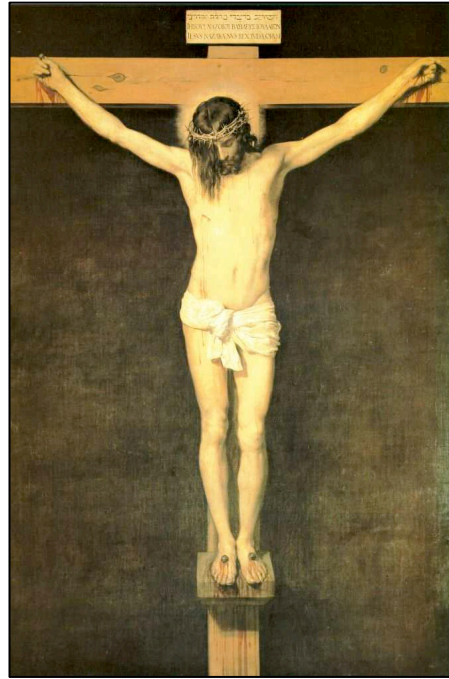
Crucifixion in Early Christianity

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ABSTRACT:

The research on The Historical Jesus is known for a high level of critical scholarship. Problems connected to every part of the life of Jesus have been addressed, with maybe one exception. There is a firm consensus about what happened on Calvary. Even famously critical scholars offer detailed accounts of the death of Jesus. The basis for this knowledge will be addressed in the present paper. A basic theory that will be discussed is that the meaning of the words commonly connected to crucifixion changed with the death of Jesus. The execution Jesus charged the hitherto diversely used terms (see my book *Crucifixion in Antiquity: An Inquiry into the Background and Significance of the New Testament Terminology of Crucifixion* [Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011]) with a historically new and distinct meaning, that which we today call crucifixion. My aim with the present paper is to apply this theory on early Christian literature. In what sense does the usage of the terminology among the early Christians differ from the earlier usage? Is it possible to trace any semantic evolution in the texts at all? The reason behind the question is an objection raised against my earlier book on crucifixion that the ambiguity of the earlier texts diminishes or even disappears after the turn of the first Century. An accompanying objection is that when the pictorial contributions of the time, e.g., the so-called staurogram, also are taken into consideration the vague picture of the punishment becomes clear. The detailed information of the fate of the Historical Jesus could be found in this younger material. My preliminary research points however in another direction. The striking ambiguity of the older texts is far more present in the younger texts – and depictions – that is commonly assumed. By that the detailed knowledge of what struck the historical Jesus on Calvary might basically be without support.

Let me begin with a brief recapitulation of my doctoral thesis, published by Mohr Siebeck in 2011, since it is highly connected to the present paper. The discussion in that book, as well as the forthcoming, revolves around the death of Jesus. *How do we know?* From where do we get our so often detailed knowledge about this crucial event? That was the basic question asked in my book *Crucifixion in Antiquity*.



My point of departure was Martin Hengel's epoch-making *Crucifixion*. The book made an impact on me, but it also caught my curiosity in a specific sense. Hengel referred to some, in his eyes, "crucifixions" in texts by Herodotus and Xenophon.

Having killed him in a way not fit to be told Oroetes ἀνεσταύρωσε [Polycrates].¹

Who, even in the case of his full brother, when he already was dead, cut of the/his head and hands and ἀνεσταύρωσεν them.²

The problem is that the victims are dead. Is it then a crucifixion? Not according to *The Oxford, Webster's* and *MacMillan English Dictionaries*.

crucifixion 1. a. The action of crucifying, or of putting to death on a cross. **b. spec. *the Crucifixion*:** that of Jesus Christ on Calvary.

crucify 1. a. trans. To put to death by nailing or otherwise fastening to a cross; an ancient mode of capital punishment among Orientals, Greeks, Romans, and other peoples; by the Greeks and Romans considered specially ignominious.³

¹ Hdt. 3.125.3.

² Xen. An. 3.1.17.

³ S.v., *The Oxford English Dictionary*.

cru·ci·fix·ion 1 a : the act of crucifying **b** *usu* cap : the crucifying of Christ – *usu.* used with the **2** : the state of one who is crucified : death upon a cross.

cru·ci·fy 1 : to put to death by nailing or binding the hands and feet to a cross **2** : to destroy the power or ruling influence of : subdue completely : mortify (they that are Christ's have *crucified* the flesh – Gal 5:24[AV]).⁴

cru·ci·fix·ion noun **1** [C/U] a method of killing someone by fastening them to a cross with nails or rope **2 the Crucifixion** the occasion when Jesus Christ was killed on the cross according to the Bible.

cru·ci·fy verb [T] **1** to kill someone by fastening them to a cross with nails or rope.⁵

Thus, on the one hand, what is a crucifixion? And, on the other hand, what are the ancient texts referring to? In basic, what are terms such as σταυροῦν and σταυρός referring to? Or, with a common expression: What do they mean?

With that in mind, I studied references to assumed crucifixions in Greek, Latin and Hebrew/Aramaic texts from Homer up to the turn of the first century of the Common Era. The outcome of the study was not what I anticipated. My aim was in the beginning to track down every single reference to crucifixions in the accessible texts, such as TLG, PHI, TLL, and so forth. I set out to broaden the knowledge by a whole series of new references.

What I found was instead absents of crucifixions in the texts. The punishment was notoriously difficult to find. It became quite challenging. If these observations were correct, lot of information that I took for granted was based on nothing. As an example, I took some major scholarly descriptions of the death of Jesus, and started to erase the information that could not be upheld by the ancient texts. The result both amused and scared me.

⁴ S.v., *Webster's Third New International Dictionary*.

⁵ S.v., *MacMillan English Dictionary*.

Martin Hengel and Anna Maria Schwemer

Das Kreuz bestand aus einem ~~in die Erde gerammten Pfahl und dem Querholz~~. Der Verurteilte, ~~der das Querholz (*patibulum*) selbst an die Richtstätte zu tragen hatte~~, wurde zuerst mit beiden Händen am Querholz ~~angenagelt oder festgebunden und dann am Pfahl hochgezogen~~. Die ~~Annagelung war wohl das Übliche~~. Sie führte ~~zusammen mit der Geißelung durch den Blutverlust schneller zum Tode~~. Es gab ~~zwei Formen~~: Die *crux commissa* ~~glich einem T~~, die *crux immissa* ~~unserem Kreuz~~. Die Höhe war ~~sehr verschieden, die Füße befanden sich oft nur wenige Zentimeter über dem Boden~~. In der Regel ~~hatte das Kreuz eine kleine Sitzstütze, das sog. *sedile*~~. In dieser schrecklichen Lage konnten die Gekreuzigten bei kräftiger Statur tagelang am Leben bleiben, ~~bis sie durch die Hitze, den Blutverlust, vor allem aber durch Kreislaufkollaps infolge völliger Unbeweglichkeit starben~~.⁶

Ethelbert Stauffer

Der Verurteilte wird ~~zunächst erbarmungslos geißelt~~. Dann ~~schleppt er den Querbalken seines Kreuzes durch die Stadt auf den Richtplatz, wo der senkrechte Kreuzesstamm bereits im Boden eingerammt ist~~. Dort wird er ~~nackt ausgezogen~~. Dann ~~nagelt man ihn mit ausgespannten Armen an den Querbalken an, zieht den Balken am Kreuzesstamm hoch und befestigt ihn zwei bis drei Meter über dem Erdboden, so daß das fertige Kreuz normalerweise die Form eines lateinischen T hat~~. Nun ~~nagelt man die Füße des Verurteilten am Kreuzesstamm fest~~. Über dem Kopf ~~des Gekreuzigten aber bringt man den Titulus an, eine Tafel mit kurzer Urteilsbegründung~~.⁷

Joseph Blinzler

Der Verurteilte wurde ~~entkleidet und – nach vollzogener Geißelung, die bei Jesus vorweggenommen war – am Boden mit ausgestreckten Armen an das Querholz genagelt, das er selbst zur Richtstatt hatte tragen müssen~~. Das Querholz wurde ~~dann mit dem Körper hochgezogen und an dem senkrecht in der Erde stehende Pfahl befestigt, worauf die Füße angenagelt wurden~~. Ein ~~ungefähr in der Mitte des Pfahls angebrachter Holzklötz stützte den~~

⁶ HENGEL and SCHWEMER, *Jesus und das Judentum*, 612.

⁷ STAUFFER, *Jerusalem und Rom*, 127.

~~hängenden Körper; von einer Fußstütze wissen die alten Berichte nichts. Das aus Pfahl und Querholz gebildete Kreuz hatte entweder die Form eines T (crux commissa) oder eines + (crux immissa). Die Höhe des Kreuzes war verschieden. Meist war es aufgerichtet wenig mehr als mannshoch, so daß die Füße des Gekreuzigten den Boden fast berührten.~~⁸

Paul Winter

~~After sentence had been passed, the condemned person was scourged, the scourging being of such a severe nature that loss of blood and frequently a general weakening in the condition of the doomed man took place. This evidently happened in the case of Jesus, making it necessary for the executioners to compel a man who passed by to assist him in carrying the cross (Mc 15, 21) after his flagellation (Mc 15, 15). A heavy wooden bar (*patibulum*) was placed upon the neck of the condemned man, and his outstretched arms were fasted to the beam. In this position, he was led to the place of execution. There he was lifted up, the beam being secured to a vertical stake (*simplex*), fixed in the ground, so that his feet hung suspended in the air. The arms of the prisoner were usually tied with ropes to the *patibulum*, though sometimes nails may have been driven into the prisoner's palms. No nails were used for affixing the feet. They were either left dangling a short distance above the ground, or were fastened to the post by ropes. Stripped of his clothes, the condemned was left on his cross till death intervened.~~⁹

Johannes Schneider

~~Crucifixion took place as follows. The condemned person carried the *patibulum* (cross beam) to the place of crucifixion — the stake was already erected. Then on the ground he was bound with outstretched arms to the beam by ropes, or else fixed to it by nails. The beam was then raised with the body and fastened to the upright post. About the middle of the post was a wooden block which supported the suspended body; there was no foot rest in ancient accounts. The height of the cross varied; it was either rather more than a man's height or even higher when the offender was to be held up for public display at a distance. On the way to execution a~~

⁸ BLINZLER, *Der Prozeß Jesu*, 360.

⁹ WINTER, *On the Trial of Jesus*, 95–96.

tablet was hung around the offender stating the *causa poenae*, ~~and this was affixed to the cross after execution so that all could see.~~

.... Scourging usually preceded it. The condemned person was exposed to mockery. Sometimes he was stripped and his clothes were divided among the executioners, though this was not the common rule. Crucifixion took place publicly on streets or elevated places. Usually the body was left to rot on the cross. But it could also be handed over for burial. The physical and mental sufferings which this slow death on the cross involved are unimaginable.¹⁰

Gerald O'Collins

Generally the victims were crucified alive; at times it was a matter of displaying the corpse of someone already executed in another way.... Whether living or already dead, the victims suffered a degrading loss of all dignity by being bound or nailed to a stake.... Under the Roman Empire, crucifixion normally included a flogging beforehand. At times the cross was only one vertical stake. ~~Frequently, however, there was a crosspiece attached either at the top to give the shape of a "T" (*crux commissa*) or just below the top, as in the form most familiar in Christian symbolism (*crux immissa*).~~ ~~The victims carried the cross or at least the transverse beam (*pattibulum*) to the place of execution, where they were stripped and bound or nailed to the beam, raised up, and seated on a *sedile* or small wooden peg in the upright beam. Ropes bound the shoulders or torso to the cross. The feet or heels of the victims were bound or nailed to the upright stake. As crucifixion damaged no vital organs, death could come slowly, sometimes after several days of atrocious pain.~~¹¹

Marcus J. Borg and John Dominic Crossan

Prisoners condemned to death by crucifixion were normally required to carry ~~the horizontal bar of the cross to the place of execution, where the vertical bar was a post permanently positioned in the ground.~~ But Mark tells us that the soldiers compelled a passerby, Simon of Cyrene, to carry Jesus's cross. Though Mark does not say why, presumably it was not an act of kindness toward Jesus, ~~but because Jesus had become too weak to carry the wooden beam himself....~~ At 9 AM, at the place named Golgotha, "the place

¹⁰ SCHNEIDER, "σταυρός," 573–74.

¹¹ O'COLLINS, "Crucifixion," 1208–09.

of the skull," the soldiers crucified Jesus. Mark refers to the event itself with only a short phrase: "And they crucified them (15:24). He did not need to say more, for his community was very familiar with the Roman practice of crucifixion. But we today may need some explanation.... As a form of public terrorism, the uprights of the crosses were usually permanently in place just outside a city gate on a high or prominent place. The victim usually carried or dragged the crossbar along with notice of the crime to be attached to one of those uprights at the place of execution.... [V]ictims were often crucified low enough to the ground that not only carrion birds but scavenging dogs could reach them. And they were often left on the cross after death until little was left of their bodies for a possible burial.¹²

Vassilos Tzaferis

In peacetime, crucifixions were carried out according to certain rules, by special persons authorized by the Roman courts.... Following the beating, the horizontal beam was placed upon the condemned man's shoulders, and he began the long, grueling march to the execution site, usually outside the city walls. A soldier at the head of the procession carried the *titulus*, an inscription written on wood, which stated the defendant's name and the crime for which he had been condemned. Later, this *titulus* was fastened to the victim's cross. When the procession arrived at the execution site, a vertical stake was fixed into the ground. Sometimes the victim was attached to the cross only with ropes. In such a case, the *patibulum* or crossbeam, to which the victim's arms were already bound, was simply affixed to the vertical beam; the victim's feet were then bound to the stake with a few turns of the rope. If the victim was attached by nails, he was laid on the ground, with his shoulders on the crossbeam, which was then raised and fixed on top of the vertical beam. The victim's feet were then nailed down against this vertical stake.... In order to prolong the agony, Roman executioners devised two instruments that would keep the victim alive on the cross for extended periods of time. One, known as a *sedile*, was a small seat attached to the front of the cross, about halfway down. This device provided some support for the victim's body and may explain the phrase used by the Romans, "to sit on the cross."... The second device added to the cross was the *suppedaneum*, or foot

¹² BORG and CROSSAN, *The Last Week*, 145–46.

support. It was less painful than the *sedile*, but it also prolonged the victim's agony. Ancient historians record many cases in which the victim stayed alive on the cross for two or three or more days with the use of a *suppedaneum*.¹³

Eerdman's Dictionary of the Bible

As a public mode of execution crucifixion gave free vent to the sadistic impulses of the executioners (Josephus *BJ* 5.11.1 [451]; Seneca *Dial.* 6.20.3; *Ep.* 101). It was preceded by scourging and other forms of torture. Criminals were often required to wear a placard around their necks listing the reason for execution (Suetonius *Caligula* 32.2; *Domitian* 10.1; Eusebius *HE* 5.1.44; cf. Mark 15:26 par.). Victims were nailed with long spikes or tied in various painful positions to crosses or wooden planks. ~~There is some evidence for a saddle or *sedile* to support the body of the crucified one, which served to prolong the punishment and prevent death by asphyxiation.~~ Often crucified people lingered for days, and death came ultimately from ~~loss of blood or asphyxiation.~~ Both men and women were crucified. Normally as a horrible deterrent to future criminals, the bodies were left on the crosses to decompose.¹⁴

The Tyndale Bible Dictionary

Crucifixion was universally recognized as the most horrible type of execution. In the East, in fact, it was used only as a further sign of disgrace for prisoners already executed, usually by decapitation. In the West the condemned criminal was scourged (whipped), ~~usually at the place of execution, and forced to carry the crossbeam to the spot where a stake had already been erected. A tablet stating the crime was often placed around the offender's neck and was fastened to the cross after the execution. The prisoner was commonly tied or sometimes nailed to the crossbeam (with the nails through the wrists, since the bones in the hand could not take the weight).~~ The beam was then raised and fixed to the upright pole. If the executioners wished a particularly slow, agonizing death, they might drive blocks or pins into the stake for a seat or a step to support the feet. Death came about either through loss of blood circulation followed by coronary failure or through the collapse of one's lungs, causing suffocation. ~~That could take days, so often the victim's legs~~

¹³ TZAFERIS, "The Archaeological Evidence for Crucifixion," 98–100.

¹⁴ DONAHUE, "Crucifixion," 298.

would be broken below the knees with a club, causing massive shock and eliminating any further possibility of easing the pressure on the bound or spiked wrists. Usually a body was left on the cross to rot, but in some instances was given to relatives or friends for burial.¹⁵

The Oxford Classical Dictionary

Crucifixion ... The general practice was to begin with flagellation of the condemned, who was then compelled to carry a cross-beam (*patibulum*) to the place of execution, where a stake had been firmly fixed in the ground. He was stripped and fastened to the cross-beam with nails and cords, and the beam was drawn up by ropes until his feet were clear of the ground. Some support for the body was provided by a ledge (*sedile*) which projected from the upright, but a footrest (*suppedaneum*) is rarely attested, though the feet were sometimes tied or nailed. Death probably occurred through exhaustion: this could be hastened through breaking the legs. After removal of the body the cross was usually destroyed.¹⁶

The Encyclopædia Britannica

There were various methods of performing the execution. Usually, the condemned man, after being whipped, or "scourged," dragged the crossbeam of his cross to the place of punishment, where the upright shaft was already fixed in the ground. Stripped of his clothing either then or earlier at his scourging, he was bound fast with outstretched arms to the crossbeam or nailed firmly to it through the wrists. The crossbeam was then raised high against the upright shaft and made fast to it about 9 to 12 feet (approximately 3 metres) from the ground. Next, the feet were tightly bound or nailed to the upright shaft. A ledge inserted about halfway up the upright shaft gave some support to the body; evidence for a similar ledge for the feet is rare and late. Over the criminal's head was placed a notice stating his name and his crime. Death, apparently caused by exhaustion or by heart failure, could be hastened by shattering the legs (*crurifragium*) with an iron club, so that shock and asphyxiation soon ended his life.¹⁷

¹⁵ ELWELL and COMFORT, *Tyndale Bible Dictionary*, 337.

¹⁶ S.v. *OCD*.

¹⁷ S.v. *EB*.

Somehow the news about my research became world news.

Just to let you know that the national U.S. news this morning is about Gunnar Samuelson and his interesting thesis.

It was covered by the large news media, e.g., CNN, ABC News, Daily Telegraph, Daily Mail, Berliner Zeitung, Pravda, and entered the theological discussions, e.g., Lane William Craig.¹⁸

In spite of the fact that my point of departure was a historical – and in part theological – question (how do we know what *happened* on Calvary) the primary theme of the book was not the knowledge *it self*. It was the *source* of the knowledge (From *where* do we get our knowledge about this epic event?) that was the theme. The book was in its core a philological investigation. It was the textual basis upon which one could build a historical knowledge that was in focus.

One could say that there are two basic levels of my previous investigation, and these levels affect the present investigation as well.

1. On the one hand, there were several problems with the often to firm connection between certain terms and the label “crucifixion/cross.” It is from my point of view, rather obvious that σταυρός and σταυροῦν cannot be translated as “cross” and “to crucify” on its own terms. To qualify such a translation, without simultaneously deliver an extended redefinition of the terms, something additional is needed. Something beyond the terms *per se*. This “something” is too often absent in the particular texts.
2. On the other hand, there were also several problems with the connection between our firm and detailed knowledge of a punishment we call “crucifixion” and the suspension punishments of antiquity. There is from my point of view a clear discrepancy between what we think happened and what the

¹⁸ For more information about the *Virkungsgeschichte*, see <http://www.exegetics.org>.

actual texts allow us to extract from them. They appear to be two different entities. Or rather, that which we call “crucifixion” is but one tiny part of a whole spectrum of suspension forms. To qualify the relevance of our firm and detailed interpretation of the texts, without simultaneously deliver an extended re-definition of the punishment, something additional is needed. Something beyond the terms *per se*. That is a description of what was actually was going on. This description is too often absent in the particular texts. All that could be said in the overwhelming cases is that they refer to some kind of a suspension.

These factors caused me to delay on the preceding step, so to speak. As also Hengel did:

I am well aware that this study remains essentially incomplete, for now at the end I should really begin all over again with a detailed exegesis of the evidence about the cross in the writings of Paul. As it is, I am breaking off where theological work proper ought to begin. The preceding chapters are no more than ‘historical preliminaries’ for a presentation of the *theologia crucis* in Paul.¹⁹

Hengel stopped where the proper theological investigation should begin. My aim was in the beginning to continue down the path at the very spot Hengel broke off. But, in my last book I found myself being stuck at Hengel’s side, and in the forthcoming book I am still there.

Since publication I have received thousands comments, suggestions, questions, and objections. In this flood I have noticed some specific questions and objections that have been frequent. These questions are the basis for my present investigation, more or less volume two of my doctoral thesis, which ended with:

The frequent and colorful depictions of crucifixions and the death of Jesus mentioned in the previous chapter are essentially without

¹⁹ Hengel, *Crucifixion*, xii.

support in the studied text material. Neither biblical nor extra-biblical texts up to the turn of the first century offer such detailed descriptions as the mentioned scholars do. The support for colorful depiction of the death of Jesus must thus be found somewhere else. This “else” will be the topic in a forthcoming investigation by the present author.²⁰

A basic objection is that the descriptions that obviously were *absent* in the pre-Christian literature are *present* in the Early Christian literature. Readers and reviewers commonly acknowledge the absent of any colorful and detailed description of the death of Jesus in the texts of the New Testament, and the punishment of crucifixion in older texts. But it is often said that these colorful and detailed descriptions are to be found in texts written by Christian authors during the first centuries.

A related objection was that the knowledge I was looking for in *texts* could be found in various *pictorial* contributions from the same Era. By that, my present research project, entitled *Crucifixion in Early Christianity* will focus upon texts as well as various forms of pictorial contributions from the turn of the first Century up to the council on Nicaea in 325.

Thus, the present project is methodically different than the previous since also depictions are source material. In the present paper I will offer a brief and preliminary overview of the source material in two sections and give some comments to that.

1. TEXTS BASED DEPICTIONS

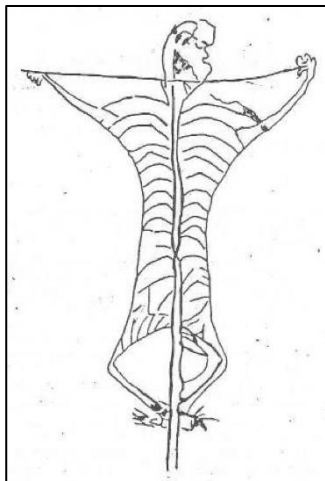
It might be that the main contribution during the time span is a connection between the death of Jesus and the Greek letter Tau. The most famous are the letter of Barnabas.

And because the cross, which is shaped like the T.

A connection between a suspension punishment and the letter Tau could also be found in Lucian's *Prometheus* and *The Consonants at Law*. The question of how to read the letter of Barnabas is connect-

²⁰ SAMUELSSON, *Crucifixion in Antiquity*, 306–07.

century have been suggested. It was found in 1857 when a building called *domus Gelotiana* was unearthed. The house had probably been used by Caligula and was after his death probably used as a *Paedagogium* for imperial servant boys or slaves. It is alleged to be among the earliest known pictorial representations of the Crucifixion of Jesus. Also this contribution could be seen as a support for the notion of a T-shaped cross. It is almost unanimously interpreted as a witness of a mocking of a Christian slave. There are some texts, e.g., by Tertullian, that shows a pejorative connection between the Christian cult and donkey-worship (onolatry). However, it could be noticed that the strangely spelled text does not mention Jesus or the Christian faith. The possibility that the inscription depicts an act of worship of Egyptian gods such as Anubis or Seth, or a man engaged in a gnostic ceremony involving a horse-headed figure could not be ruled out. The strange sign in the top-right could point in that direction. Within sethian gnosticism they



prayed to the god Typhon-Seth, who had a donkey head as symbol, with from time to time had an Ypsilon on the right side of the head.

Another quite similar graffito was found in an amphitheater in Puzzeoli further south in Italy. The image could be seen as a depiction of Jesus, which is commonly done. But it could also be seen as a depiction of a suspended slave woman wearing a tunic. An inscription over the victim's head reading ALCIMILLA have been identified (M. Guarducci).

A contribution which is 100 years too young could also be considered here, and that is the famous door panels from Santa Sabina church on the Aventine hill in Rome. There is not much of a traditional cross visible here. It has even been noticed that the position of the three males coheres well with a traditional prayer



