

In my previous post I began to discuss Craig Evan's essay "Getting the Burial Traditions and Evidences Right," which was his attempt to show that the views I set forth in How Jesus Became God were flawed. In his view, the New Testament portrayal of Jesus' burial is almost certainly historical: Jesus really was buried, in a known tomb, on the afternoon of his death, immediately after he expired, by Joseph of Arimathea, a member of the Jewish Sanhedrin who had, the night before, called for his execution. My view is that this is entirely unlikely, that Jesus was probably left on his cross to suffer the ravages of time and, possibly, scavenging animals, as was the practice of Romans for crucified victims. In no instance was this practice more constant than in the case of "enemies of the state," anyone, for example, who was involved in an insurrection or who threatened a violent opposition to Roman rule (or was thought to have threatened). Jesus himself, of course, was executed on just this charge, of planning to supplant the Roman governorship of Judea in order to set himself up as king.

In the previous post I dealt with Craig's discussion of a passage in Philo - the one text from antiquity that explicitly indicates that a governor might sometimes show clemency in allowing a crucified victim to be buried. I argued that Craig completely misconstrues this evidence.

Craig goes on to argue that clemency was in fact a Roman practice more generally. His reason for arguing so is to show that it is not inconceivable that Pilate would be merciful and would allow Jesus to be buried, since Roman authorities frequently, in Craig's opinion, did show mercy. In his words, "the Romans not only permitted the bodies of the executed, including the crucified, to be buried [Craig never does show this was a policy or custom - he only has the quotation from Philo], they even pardoned those in prison and sometimes even pardoned those awaiting or faced with the thread of execution, whether by crucifixion or my other means" (p. 75). Craig refers to this as the "Roman practice of granting clemency."

When I read this statement for the first time I expected Craig to cite some examples of Roman administrators who staid the execution by crucifixion of criminals - or even just their execution by any means. Oddly enough, Craig next cites four instances of clemency - none of them from the days of Jesus and none of them in the land of Israel - and none of them involves a person convicted to be executed, let alone crucified, let alone for committing high treason against the state. So why does he say...

FOR THE REST OF THIS POST, go to your paid membership site. If you don't belong yet, THERE'S STILL A CHANCE!!!

Membership Content Continues:

So why does he say that Romans regularly forgave those worthy of execution, even by crucifixion, if he isn't able to cite any evidence? My suspicion is that he's hoping that we won't notice! ☐

Before proceeding, I need to stress again the important point. If we want to say that Pilate showed clemency to Jesus by allowing him a decent burial immediately after he died, and we want to say that this was part of the "Roman practice of granting clemency," then the very best evidence would indicate that Romans regularly allowed criminals who were crucified for high treason to be buried. Craig doesn't cite any instances of this. That's because none exist. The next best thing would be evidence that Romans allowed criminals crucified for other reasons to be given decent burials. Again, the only evidence of this is Philo, which does not show a Roman *pattern* or "practice" of clemency, but was a specific instance

done for a particular reason - not to show clemency but to honor the birthday of an emperor. Other than that, there are no examples for Craig to cite.

Jesus was executed for high treason. Romans executed people like that by crucifixion and allowed their bodies to decompose on their crosses to show with absolute clarity and force that Roman power was not to be crossed. In cases such as this, they showed no mercy. I don't know of any counter-examples.

The examples Craig does provide are not of people who were executed, let alone crucified, let alone crucified as enemies of the state. They are of people convicted of lesser crimes who were let go: there is one man condemned to be scourged in Egypt in 85 CE; some who were released from prison in 112 CE; an undated instance of some prisoners set free; and an instance of prisoners who had their chains removed in the first century BCE (in Rome? The reference is Pliny).

So here we have four instances spread out over the course of 200 years. In my view, to say that this shows that it is probable that Pilate allowed Jesus to be buried is a huge stretch. The people to whom clemency were shown were not just in completely different times and places; they were guilty of different crimes, they all had other extenuating circumstances that do not apply to Jesus, and none of them is said to have been condemned to death, let alone death by crucifixion, let alone on grounds of being an enemy of the state. (And none of them, of course, involves a person being allowed a decent burial.)

Later (on p. 76) Craig does indicate that there was an instance of clemency in the land of Israel: some 35 years after Jesus the governor Albinus, as he was leaving office (and in order to show what a kind fellow he was?) released from prison those who were guilty of crimes "other than murder" (that's Craig's phrase; see below) - that is petty crimes. This is a better example, since it is from Judea - although it is not in the days of Jesus and does not involve Pilate (about whom I'll be saying more in a later post). But Craig doesn't actually cite the passage from the Jewish historian Josephus in which this incident is mentioned. It makes a difference. Here it is. Judge its relevance for yourself:

But when Albinus heard that Gessius Florus was coming to succeed him, he was desirous to appear to do somewhat that might be grateful to the people of Jerusalem; so he brought out all those prisoners who seemed to him to be most plainly worthy of death, and ordered them to be put to death accordingly. But as to those who had been put into prison on some trifling occasions, he took money of them, and dismissed them; by which means the prisons were indeed emptied, but the country was filled with robbers. (Antiquities 20, 215).

So, is this an instance of Roman clemency? Well, yes, to the petty robbers stuck in prison - whom he released after receiving bribes (!). But not for anyone who deserved a death sentence. These he summarily executed.

Romans did not show mercy to people who committed a capital offense (note: it is not just murderers - it is anyone who deserved death in his opinion; that could have been any range of person.) Even worse than capital offenders, of course, were enemies of the state. These would not have been left in prison for a while. They would have been crucified to suffer a prolonged and unbelievably painful death in the public eye, humiliated, debased, and tortured for all to see, and then left to rot on their crosses.



[Did Roman Laws Require Decent Burials?](#)
[Did Romans Allow Decent Burials?](#)