

Did Romans Allow Decent Burials?

Now that I have restated my views about the burial of Jesus by citing two passages from How Jesus Became God, and emphasized one particular general point – that it is of utmost importance to remember why Romans crucified people, and in particular why they crucified those who were guilty of insurrection, the threat of insurrection, or high treason (a point that I cannot stress enough: Jesus was executed for calling himself the King of the Jews – a political charge of treason against the state) – I can now begin to summarize the counter-arguments that Craig Evans has made in his relatively long response, “Getting the Burial Traditions and Evidences Right.” Despite this title, and despite the respect I have for Craig as a scholar, I have to say that in my judgment he gets virtually all the evidence(s !) precisely wrong.

He focuses his counter-argument on two of my main points: the Roman practices of crucifixion and the character of Pontius Pilate in particular. I will respond to all of his major claims – but if anyone wants me to respond to yet anything else in his essay when I’m done, just let me know and I’ll be happy to oblige.

When reading Craig’s response, I have to say that I was taken aback by the fact that he started to counter my views by quoting a passage from the Jewish philosopher from Alexandria, Egypt, Philo, in order to show that Romans had a “practice” (his term) of allowing bodies of crucified people to be given burials under “various circumstances.” I was surprised because this is the very passage that I myself used in my discussion! When I cited the passage, I did so precisely because it is the *one* literary reference we have in any ancient source to any Roman officials of any kind showing clemency to crucified victims by allowing them to be

given a decent burial. I cited it for a very specific reason (which I stated), namely, to show that the *one* exception we know about has no bearing at all on the case of Jesus.

Craig cites the same passage to argue that “it was in fact Roman practice , under various circumstances, to permit bodies of the crucified to be taken down and buried” (How God Became Jesus, p. 75). Craig reads the passage to show that “normally” crucified men were allowed burial in these “various circumstances” (pp. 74, 75). I will quote the passage and then explain why I think this reading of it is completely wrong, and then you will be able to make up your own mind.

But first I have to say that Craig actually *objects* to my use of the passage because he thinks it is irrelevant to the case of Jesus. Here’s what he says: “Had Jesus been crucified in Alexandria, Ehrman’s point would be well taken. But Jesus was crucified in Jerusalem, in the land of Israel, where very different political and religious factors were in play” (p. 75).

Now *this* is an argument I just don’t get. Craig wants to use the passage to make his point about Roman “practice” but he does not think that I can use the passage to make my point about an exception to that practice. And, well, why would the passage be relevant for his case but not to mine exactly? He doesn’t say.

But I would argue just the opposite: the passage makes sense for my point and not for his. And here is why. I cited the passage because it is the only known *exception* to the rule that Roman authorities left bodies on the cross rather than allowing them to be buried (although see below: this is not actually true either: these people Philo refers to were also left on their crosses). I don’t cite exceptions in Jerusalem, in the land of Israel, precisely because there ARE NO KNOWN EXCEPTIONS in Jerusalem in the land of Israel. Well then, if the passage does not apply to Jerusalem, why does Craig cite

it? For an obvious reason: he wants to say that the situation in Alexandria, Israel IS applicable to the situation of Jesus, in Jerusalem, Judea.

But my entire point is that it is NOT applicable. Here's the passage.

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