I have always said that people were crucified by being nailed through their *wrists* instead of their hands. I had heard that in college when I was maybe 18, and I’ve been saying it ever since. And I still say it because it’s apparently true. But I never knew how we knew. Was it simply common sense that a nail/stake through the hand would rip out, and needed to go between two strong bones? Or did we have some evidence? And if it’s true that the nail/stake went through the wrist, why do virtually *all* the artistic representations show the holes in the hands?

There are entire books on crucifixion in antiquity - I don’t mean books about the significant of Jesus’ death, but on what crucifixion actually involved. When I was in grad school I read Martin Hengel’s brief study; in more recent days John Granger Cook has written a massive tome, which I’ve looked at but haven’t read cover-to-cover (it’s amazing what I haven’t read…). I’m sure it is the drop-dead authoritative account. And he probably covers the topic. But it’s never been an issue pressing enough for me to read around about.

Until today, by complete serendipity.

Let me give a *bit* of background to set the stage, to deal with a couple of points that will immediately be raised in the minds of some of you.

This post is unusually interesting. Wanna read it? Join the blog. It doesn’t cost much, every penny goes to charity, and you’ll learn so much your friends and family won’t be able to *stand* it.

- We have no literary description from the ancient world explaining how it was actually *done*. Ancient authors appear simply to assume that everyone knew, just as today most authors who talk about someone driving a car don’t explain how the car is constructed. Readers in the distant future, if they don’t have pictures or car manuals etc, may just have to figure it out.
- We also don’t have archaeological evidence that answers the question: hands or wrists.
  - We have the remains of only *one* crucified victim from antiquity, and it has provided us with some important clues about some aspects of the procedure. If you want to see more about it, just search for “nails” on the blog, and you’ll find a number of posts. Here’s one of them:
    Yehohanan’s case is vitally important, but doesn’t answer definitively: hands or wrists.
  - Archaeologists have discovered a number of crucifixion nails (known to be such because of the organic material still on them that can be tested), but again it doesn’t answer the question of where the nails were placed.
- I regularly get asked if we are talking about a “cross” (that is, two pieces of woods joined together somehow in perpendicular, to form a kind of “T” or even an “X”) or a “stake,” as some religious groups insist, that is, a simply upright, a kind of pole. The answer is almost certainly “cross.” When ancient people talk about the shape of the STAUROS (as it’s called in Greek) — for example, the epistle of Barnabas, Justin Martyr — they liken it to a person standing upright with arms stretched out, or to the mast of a ship. With preliminaries out of the way, how do we know that it was wrists instead of hands? It turns out, we’ve known only since the 1930s. At least that’s what I’ve read today, by complete accident. If someone has more knowledge about this, let me know.

I obviously read a lot — it’s part of what I get paid for — and, naturally, almost everything is
connected with my research, books and articles on antiquity and especially early Christianity. But I also like to read outside of my work, and so I do so a bit every day. Mainly novels, especially, not only, nineteenth century. I’m just returning to Frankenstein (which I’ve always found rather immature and preachy, but interesting; Mary Shelley started it when she was 19!!). I’m reading it in part because of my next book on coming Armageddon – fears that we are bringing the end upon ourselves – but also because I want to read Jeanette Winterson’s apparently brilliant new novel Frankisstein: A Love Story.

But that’s not where I learned about crucifixion (though it would be a sensible guess). I also have some kind of non-fiction thing going, but I spend far less time on it, since reading non-fiction is more or less my day job. A busman’s holiday. Still, I’ve been long fascinated by issues of anatomy, and so when Bill Bryson’s new book came out, I jumped all over it. All his books are amazing (and some hilarious: Walk in the Woods!). But this one is right up my alley: The Body: A Guide for Occupants. Fantastic.

And out of the blue I learned something. About crucifixion.

In talking about the skeleton and the various skeletal parts, Bryson, as is his wont, breaks into an anecdote. A lot about what modern folk know about the comparative strength of the hand and the wrist is because of some strange work done in the 1930s by a French physician named Pierre Barbet, who became obsessed with the question of how crucifixion worked.

As a scientist, he knew it would take some actual experiments to figure out how the process is done. But he couldn’t very well crucify people to find out. So he did the next best thing. As a surgeon he had access to cadavers. And so he nailed a number of them in various ways to wooden crosses, to see what “worked.” If nails went through the hands, the weight of the body would be too much, and, in Bryson’s words “the hands would literally tear apart.” Doesn’t work. But if through the wrist? Yup that works fine.

So they must have done it that way. Jesus and many thousands of others were nailed through the wrists (unless they were tied, which is also widely considered to have been one of the options.)

Two questions that Bryson doesn’t address, since his book isn’t about crucifixion per se.

- Why do descriptions of Jesus’ wounds in ancient texts refer to his hands instead of his wrists? Ancients apparently understood the wrist to be part of the hand.
- Why do artistic representations show the wounds in the hands instead of the wrists? Possibly because virtually paintings were all done after crucifixion had been abolished (fourth century) and no one *knew* how it was done, since it was so long ago and there were no descriptions available. The Gospels speak of the “hands” and so artists assume it meant the hand rather than the wrist. BUT, it is interesting that one of the earliest depictions of the crucifixion, on an ivory panel of the fourth century in the British Museum clearly shows the nails in middle of the hands. For a photo, see my book The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings, p. 116 (in both 6th and 7th editions). Is this artists also influenced by the Gospels instead of historical reality? Those are my guesses. But as to wrists vs. hands: it’s nice to learn something without looking for it!
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End of the Year Final Exam!