

We come now, at last, to the best argument in Craig Evans' arsenal, in his attack on the views of Jesus' burial that I set forth in in How Jesus Became God. Tomorrow I will deal with the second best - an argument from archaeology. Craig makes a somewhat bigger deal of the second best; in fact he throws off this, his best argument rather quickly. But it's the most important point of the many (many!) issues he raises. The argument is this. In one passage of Josephus's writings, in an extremely brief few words (it's only half of one sentence) (this is the only half sentence in the entire corpus not only of Josephus's 30 volumes of writing but in the entire corpus of pagan and Jewish literature of all of antiquity that makes this claim) he explicitly indicates that Jews buried victims of crucifixion before sunset. Craig's commentary on the passage amounts only to two sentences.

At the end of the day I don't find even this piece of evidence persuasive, and in this post I will explain why. This will be a long one: I'm getting a bit weary of this topic and want to bring it on home....

First I quote the passage, also found in Craig's essay (pp. 78-79). This is in reference to events transpiring in Jerusalem during the Jewish-Roman War, and to violent cruelties happening within the city before the Romans arrived:

"They [this is referring to the Idumeaens, a group of foreigners that Josephus considers impious and evil] actually went so far in their impiety as to cast out their dead bodies without burial, although the Jews are so careful about burial rites that even malefactors who have been sentenced to crucifixion are taken down and buried before sunset" (Jewish War, 4.317)

This would be a good time to review what I said several posts ago about the need to be consistently critical when we are dealing with our sources. At every point the historian - if she or he wants to be a historian and not an apologist for a particular point of view, ideology, or theology - has to subject the historical sources at our disposal to critical evaluation to determine if and how far they are historically trustworthy. And so here: is Josephus telling the truth when he says that Jews (sometimes? usually? always?) buried victims of crucifixion before sunset on the days of their deaths? If so, we have a very neat indeed tie-in to the Gospels of the New Testament, where the otherwise unknown Joseph of Arimathea does just that with the body of Jesus.

To evaluate Josephus's comment, we should first consider its context. The quotation above occurs in a passage in the Jewish War when there was terrible infighting within Jerusalem, as the Romans were bearing down on the city, and the leaders of one of the conflicting parties invited the foreign Idumeans into the city. They came in and brought horrible slaughter and bloodshed with them. It's a complicated historical situation and not easy to summarize neatly. You can read the account here:

<http://sacred-texts.com/jud/josephus/war-4.htm>

Josephus wants to stress that those whom the Idumeans killed were dishonored: they were not given decent burials. He contrasts this heinous behavior with that of "the Jews," who allegedly buried even crucified victims in accordance with the Law of Moses, before sunset.

Several things to say here, each individual point being important, in my opinion:

FOR THE REST OF THIS POST, go to your paid members' site. If you don't belong yet, JOIN, OR YOU MAY NEVER KNOW!!!

Member Content Continues:

You need to be logged in to see this part of the content. Please [Login](#) to access.



[The Skeletal Remains of Yehohanan and Their Significance](#)
[More on Josephus and Jewish Burial Practices](#)