

I have received the following question

**QUESTION:**

One thing came to mind during the discussion of whether crucified persons were buried. There is a case where an ossuary was found with a nail through the ankle bone. [I think it was ankle, might have been wrist.] Obviously this was an exceptional case; as I recall, there are some 900 bone boxes in Israeli museums and this is the only such case, where according to Josephus hundreds (thousands?) were crucified in 1st Century Palestine. But at any rate, what do you make of this exceptional case?

**RESPONSE:**

I dealt with this issue on the blog several years ago, while I was responding to the claims of my scholarly colleague Craig Evans, who maintained that Jesus must have been buried right away, not left to hang on the cross for days, as I had argued in my book *How Jesus Became God*. Craig was asserting the traditional Christian view (as found in the Gospels), and he mounted a number of arguments based on various pieces of evidence. I responded to them one at a time. You can see the entire thread if you look back at posts from July 2014.

Here is where I deal with the evidence of “the crucified man” — the skeletal remains of a person from about Jesus’ time with the crucifixion nail still in his ankle! Even if you don’t read the other comments I made about Evans’s arguments (back in 2014), this one can make sense and deals with an issue that is both important and interesting. Here is what I said back then.

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I plan to make this the last post responding to Craig Evans’s article, “Getting the Burial Traditions and Evidences Right,” in which he attempts to refute my argument in *How Jesus Became God*, that Jesus was probably not given a decent burial on the day of his crucifixion. Several readers have asked me interesting questions about this or that thing that I’ve said, and I may try to answer these questions in a few days or, well, eventually; but for now, this will be my last post on it. It think maybe this thread has been more than enough!

I have dealt with a wide range of Craig’s arguments, and have saved his two strongest arguments for last. In my last post I dealt with the claim of Josephus that Jews (always? usually? sometimes?) buried crucifixion victims before sunset, and I showed that as a general statement it simply isn’t true, and argued that in any event it would not have applied to a case such as that of Jesus, one who was crucified as an enemy of the state. Today I deal with the second argument that had been seen by some readers to have a good deal force: an archaeological discovery of a crucified man. Once again, I do not think this provides Craig with the evidence that he wants and needs in order to make his case.

Let me first introduce what this evidence is. What follows is a very brief description of the discovery of the skeletal remains of Yehohanan, the crucified man.

This is drawn from my textbook on the New Testament:

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Crucifixion is mentioned in a wide range of ancient sources, and there are occasional references to the various ways Romans (who did not invent the practice; it was used by the Persians much earlier) performed the deed. But there are no explicit descriptions of how it was done. Nor until fairly recently, there was not a single piece of archaeological evidence to explain the practice.

In 1968, however, a significant archaeological discovery was made in a suburb of Jerusalem: an ossuary with the skeletal remains of a man named Yehohanan (= John) who had been crucified.

Yehohanan had been nailed to an upright beam of wood through the ankle; but the nail hit a knot in the wood and bent, making it difficult to be removed after his death. And so a chunk of the wood was broken off, and Yehohanan was buried with wood and nail still attached to the ankle bone.

The discovery of his remains caused quite a sensation, and experts who have examined them have drawn some important historical findings. Yehohanan, who would have been 5 feet 5 inches tall and probably in his mid twenties, was nailed through the ankle on to the side of the upright beam; his arms were evidently tied rather than nailed.

It seems doubtful, however, that this was the normal mode of crucifixion — the early traditions about Jesus, written by first-century persons who presumably understood the practice quite well, presuppose that he was nailed in both wrists (= hands) and feet (see John 20:25).

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In considering Craig's argument that this important archaeological finding shows that it was Jewish custom to bury a crucified victim on the day of his death, one point is important to stress. It is a point that Craig and I agree on. Jewish ossuaries (bone-boxes) were often used to house the remains of multiple persons. In an earlier post I mentioned the discovery of the ossuary of Caiaphas, the high priest at the time of Jesus' death. It was discovered in a tomb with a number of other ossuaries. One of them had the skeletal remains of six individuals. The ossuary containing the ankle bone of Yehohanan contained the remains of two other persons as well. That will be worth remembering.

The discovery of Yehohanan's remains may well be significant. For Craig they are highly significant. For one thing, this is our *\*only\** archaeological evidence of the practice of crucifixion. And for Craig it is highly significant that it is precisely of a man who was buried. Doesn't this show that Jews buried crucified victims?

To that argument you may have several responses. My own responses include the following:

- Since this is the only crucified victim whose remains are known to survive, out of the many tens of thousands of people crucified in the ancient world, it cannot be used to establish a "practice" or a "pattern" of burial. One instance is not a pattern. It is an instance. Is it the exception or the rule? There's simply no way to know. I wish there were!
- More significant: the excavator of the tomb indicated that it gave signs that the family connected with Yehohanan was aristocratic and well-placed. That was not the case of Jesus. We know that aristocrats sometimes carried clout that no one else did (Josephus

himself, for example, who was at the very top of the aristocratic-elite-heap, was able to assert his considerable influence to have three associates of his taken down off their crosses because of his personal connection with the general Titus; no one else would have dared even try!). Did one of Yehohan's relatives assert influence to retrieve his body? Again, there's simply no way to know.

- Yet more significant: for what was Yehohanan crucified? Sometimes lower level criminals may have been allowed burials - if we can trust Josephus that far. And so was Yehohanan not a lower level criminal but, like Jesus, an enemy of the state? Nothing indicates so. Was he, instead, a low life (despite family connections)? We don't know. Was he a favored slave who had run away? (Probably not.) Did he insult a Roman soldier and club him over the head? Did he steal the Roman governor's favorite horse? Did he get caught sleeping with the daughter of the local centurion? We have NO IDEA why he was crucified. And so we have no way of evaluating whether he shows that someone crucified for calling himself King of the Jews would be given a decent burial. His remains simply give us no evidence for the one point we're interested in.
- Most significant of all: how long was Yehohanan on the cross after he died? WE HAVE NO WAY TO KNOW. Was he taken off the cross the afternoon of his death? There is no evidence. Was he left to the elements and scavengers for several days, as was the Roman practice? We have no evidence. So is his ankle bone evidence for bodies being taken from their crosses on the days of their deaths? No, it is no evidence. (Let me stress in this connection: I DO think that Jesus' remains were eventually buried. That is, the Romans did \*something\* with his corpse, presumably after a few days; possibly they dumped it in a common grave. So too Yehohanan's relatives, as aristocrats, may have been allowed - after some days - to place his body in a tomb, from which they retrieved his skeleton a year later). Craig tries to anticipate this problem in his comments by arguing that the skeletal remains of Yehohanan show that his legs were broken. And why broken? Ah ha! It must have been to speed his death! Why would someone do that? Because he had to be buried before sunset! And so there \*is\* evidence that Jewish victims were buried before sunset! Right?

Well, unfortunately, no. There is one problem that Craig himself rightly admits in his article. Did the bone damage occur while Yehohanan was alive or while being removed from the cross? The expert who did the forensics analysis of the skeleton (well, one of the two - Joe Zias, whom I mentioned before), the analysis that Craig, I, and everyone else in the known universe relies on, believes that the bone damage was done \*after\* Yehohanan had been dead - e.g., when being removed from the cross. Experts claim that there could be considerable damage to the remains when trying to remove nails and such. So the legs were not broken to facilitate death.

But there's a bigger problem. The ossuary that contained Yehohanan's ankle and those bones. Well, the bones were not connected to the ankle. And the ossuary contained the skeletal remains of two others. And so, as Craig himself says: "Indeed the talus under question may actually belong to one of the other two individuals, whose skeletal remains had been placed in the ossuary" (p. 84). Yes indeed. That's a very big problem.

Let me stress as emphatically as I can that I wish we had archaeological evidence that could help us know more about the crucifixion of Jesus. It would be of utmost significance even if we had any archaeological evidence to help us know, in general, whether it is likely that Romans overlooked their normal practice of leaving crucified victims on their crosses when it came to Jews in Judea. We do know that they did not overlook the practice in times of war. And we recognize the ideological reasons for the practice in the first place. Part of the punishment of crucifixion, in addition to the rather nasty fact itself of being tortured to

death, was not to be allowed a decent burial. Anyone who crosses the power of Rome is faced with that power in the most brutal way possible. The person is rendered helpless on a cross to die a slow and excruciating death in full public view, and after death to be left to the elements and the scavenging animals. The Romans wanted to exercise that power in *\*particular\** for enemies of the state. Rome punished these people severely, and did not care if the locals found it offensive to their cultural or religious sensitivities.

Jesus was condemned as an enemy of the state. Given all the balance of probabilities, one way or the other, as adduced by Craig in his article and by me in my book and in this response, I think it is most likely that he did not receive a decent burial by Joseph of Arimathea, or by anyone else, on the day of his death. He was probably left on his cross for days, in accordance with standard Roman practice. Only then were his remains removed and “buried.” In such a case, this would probably mean being thrown into a common tomb, where decomposition would continue relatively quickly, until he very soon would no longer be recognizable.

If you belonged to the blog you would get meaty posts like this *\*all\** the time! So why not join? It won't cost you much, and every penny goes to help the needy. So there's no downside!



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