

This is part 5 in a thread of my responses to Craig Evans, who has argued against the positions I take in [How Jesus Became God](#). [Here's the beginning of the thread](#).

Most people acquire their knowledge about ancient Roman crucifixion from the accounts of Jesus' crucifixion in the Gospels.

They learn the stories about the cross, the nails, the "King of the Jews" sign nailed above Jesus' head, and the agony he endured.

But there's another side to the story.

By studying the facts of Roman crucifixion, including their methods and process, you'll find that crucifixion was about a lot more than pain and punishment. Their goal was absolute humiliation.

Why is this important?

Because you must understand the REASON the Romans crucified people in order to understand an important position I take in my book, [How Jesus Became God](#), which Craig Evans has attacked. In the book, I argue that it is likely that Jesus was not given a decent burial, as described in the Gospel accounts of Joseph of Arimathea and his request for the body on the afternoon of the crucifixion.

(See my previous two responses in this thread [here](#) and [here](#)).

Rather, it is more likely that - as was the case with virtually every other crucified person in all of Roman antiquity - **Jesus' body was left on the cross for several days before being tossed into some kind of pit**. It sounds bizarre, but I think that's what the evidence suggests. And Craig thinks otherwise. This will be an interesting point/counter-point/counter-counter-point, I hope - as it is obviously a very important issue for a very great number of people.

Why Crucifixion? When Romans Needed "Special" Punishment

Before taking on Craig's arguments, I want to make one overarching point of my own that cannot be stressed enough, since it is the single most important key to the entire question. It has to do with why Romans crucified people - and in particular (even *more* important) why they crucified people for insurrection against the state or for intended (in the Roman eyes) insurrection.

Crucifixion was not invented by the Romans, but they used it a lot. It was thought of as the most horrible, painful, tortuous, and humiliating form of execution possible. If Romans wanted simply to kill someone without a fuss, **there were plenty of other means available** - for example, beheading.

Crucifixion was reserved for special cases.

But there were lots of special cases. Two of the most common were low-life criminals and enemies of the state. These are two very different matters - they are not the same thing. Low life criminals would include, for example, slaves who had escaped from their masters

and committed a crime. If caught, a slave could be crucified. There were two reasons they were subjected to such a tortuous, slow, and humiliating death. They were receiving the “ultimate” punishment for their crime and, possibly more important, they were being used as a spectacle to warn any other slave who was thinking about escaping or committing crimes what could happen to *them*.

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Roman Crucifixion Process and Methods

The Romans had a very different view of capital punishment from ours. In the U.S., if someone is to be executed, there are enormous concerns about due process. Appeals can take almost literally forever in some places. The executions themselves are done in private, and the goal (well, the stated goal, anyway) is to make the death as swift and painless as possible, away from the public view.

That’s not how the Romans did it.

The Romans did not have a procedure for due process, trial by jury, right of appeal; they did not delay punishment; and they wanted some executions (for example, of low lifes and enemies of the state) to be as public, torturous, long and drawn out, degrading, and humiliating as possible. If someone in New Jersey is convicted of carjacking, they may need to spend some time behind bars away from public view. If something like that happened in the Roman empire (chariot-jacking?) (well, OK, horse theft) they would nail the lout to a cross, in a public place, so everyone passing by could hear him scream and watch him writhe for a couple of days. And then they’d leave the body on the cross so that the birds and dogs could get at it. Do that a few times for horse-theft, and see how many horse thieves you’ll find. It was an exceedingly more effective disincentive for crime. Or so the Romans reasoned, in any event.

Worse than escaping as a slave or stealing a horse -very much worse - was opposing the Roman state itself. This is something the Romans WOULD NOT tolerate. Enemies of the state had to be shown what the power of the state was. And crucifixion was how it was done. If you were a resistor to Roman military action - crucified. If you were caught attacking Roman troops - crucified. If you plotted to overthrow the local Roman government - crucified.

Crucifixion was a particularly poignant statement when it came to enemies of the state. Those who were opposed to Rome - I don’t mean those who didn’t much like the Romans running the show, or those who wished things were different, or those who hoped something better would come along, but instead, those who actively sought to oppose the state, or at least were *thought* by the Roman authorities to seek to oppose the state - were unceremoniously condemned to be crucified precisely in order to show how absolutely HELPLESS anyone is who thinks they can oppose the power of Rome.

Ancient Roman Crucifixion was a Symbol

Roman power was very real, very tangible, very palpable. And it was played out on the bodies of those who tried to oppose it. Crucifixion was the perfect mode of execution for anyone engaging in, supporting, or endorsing violent opposition to the Roman state. You think you can oppose US? Well then, this is what we'll do to YOU to show you how powerful you really are. We will take you, strip you naked, drag you to a public place, nail your hands (wrists) to a cross beam, nail your feet to an upright, set you up as a public spectacle for people to see and mock. By doing so we will not only torture you to death (often it took a couple of days for a person to die of asphyxiation). We will reveal to all who can see how helpless you are.

Your hands and feet will be nailed securely to wood and you will be left to hang in a position where you cannot fend for yourself. You will not be able to move your body. You will not be able to wave off the scavenging birds. You will not be able to kick away the roaming dogs. You will not be able to lift a finger to help yourself. We can do this to you. And if you oppose our power, this *is* what we will do to you.

Crucifixion was not merely a death by torture. It was a symbolic statement that WE are Roman power and YOU are nothing. And if you oppose us, we will prove it, by rendering you absolutely, completely powerless, while we wrack your body with pain and make you scream.

And the proof did not end with your last breath. Romans left bodies on the cross for clear and distinct reasons.

Everyone wanted a decent burial in the ancient world. It was far more important to people then than it is to people today. A decent burial, for many, was required for a decent afterlife. It honored the body of the one departed. Not to receive a decent burial was disgusting, scandalous, gut-wrenching, debasing, humiliating. And so Romans did not allow crucified victims - especially enemies of the state - to be buried. They left them on the crosses as their bodies rot and the scavengers went on the attack. To allow a decent burial was to cave into the desires precisely of the people who were being mocked and taught a lesson. No decency allowed. The body has to rot, and then we'll toss it into a grave.

This was especially the case - I reiterate - for enemies of the state. Rare exceptions might be made for low-life criminals - escaped slaves, horse thieves, general riff-raff who did not matter to anyone in power. But enemies of the state did matter to those in power. Because these enemies had the temerity, stupidity, and willfulness to want to oppose that power. If that's what they choose to do, this is the price they will pay - and everyone will see it, for days. This is the true history of Roman crucifixion.

Roman Crucifixion of Jesus

Jesus was not executed as a member of the riff-raff, as a slave who committed a crime against his owner, as a lowly criminal from the lower classes. Although we have no Roman crucifixion records, Jesus' death by crucifixion for [calling himself King of the Jews](#) is as close to a historical certainty as we have. Craig Evans agrees with that. Virtually everyone agrees with that. Jesus was killed on a political charge. By calling himself king - in Roman eyes (whether this is what he personally meant or not) - he was making a political claim,

that he was going to replace the Roman governance of Judea with a kingdom in which he himself would be king. This could happen (in Roman eyes) only if there was a rebellion. Rebellions have to be suppressed - and if you're Roman, they have to be suppressed violently, forcefully, mercilessly. If you think you are going to replace the Roman ruler, if you think you can start an insurrection against the state, if you think you can take our power away and exert your own power, well, we'll SHOW you how much power you have.

The crucifixion of Jesus was a forceful and unmistakable demonstration of Roman power.

They humiliated him, tortured him, nailed him to a cross so that he couldn't raise a hand in his own defense, let alone overthrow the ruling Roman authority. It is what Romans did to insurrectionists and prospective insurrectionists, to anyone who opposed their power by proposing to set up their own kingdom. The humiliation and show of force was not limited to a six-hour (in Jesus' case, somewhat unusually, if the Gospels can be trusted on this point) torture. To show what Roman power is, the body would be left on the cross, so everyone in that public place could see what happens to anyone who thinks they can cross the power of Rome. There was no quarter, no mercy, no sympathy. Instead, there was public humiliation and torture and the public display, for days, of the bodies of those who think that they will start their own kingdom.

This ideology of crucifixion needs to be firmly born in mind when thinking about whether Romans made an exception to their policies of crucifixion in the case of Jesus' burial.

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