

Class Objectives – After this class you will be able to:

- Discuss some of the major concepts associated with crucifixion in the Mediterranean world.
- Discuss some of the major concepts associated with crucifixion in Palestine and early Judaism.
- Discuss controversial interpretive issues in Deuteronomy 21:22-23.

Key Terms:

- Curse

Crucifixion in Antiquity and the Death of Christ (cont.)

I. Penal Suspension in Antiquity:

II. OT and Penal Suspension (cont.):

A. Genesis 40:19

B. Deuteronomy 21:22-23

1. “sin bearing a judgment of death”
2. “executed”
3. “hang him on a tree”
4. limits the practice of penal suspension
5. “a curse of God”

C. Joshua 8:29

D. Esther 7:9-10

E. Summary

1. Suspension penalties were well known in Mesopotamian and Mediterranean history.
2. This can also be seen in the Old Testament.
3. The Old Testament limited the practice of penal suspension, and associated the suspended person with the 'curse of God.'

III. Crucifixion in the Mediterranean World:

A. How was crucifixion perceived in the world of Jesus?

1.

Plutarch, *Moralia* 554a-b

...every criminal who goes to execution must carry his own cross on his back...

2.

Cicero, *Against Verres* II.v.66

(170) To bind a Roman citizen is a crime, to flog him is an abomination, to slay him is almost an act of murder: to crucify him is—what? There is no fitting word that can possibly describe so horrible a deed.

3.

Seneca, *Epistles* 101

Can anyone be found who would prefer wasting away in pain, dying limb by limb, or letting out his life drop by drop, rather than expiring once for all? Can any man be found willing to be fastened to the accursed tree, long sickly, already deformed, swelling with ugly tumours on chest and shoulders, and draw the breath of life amid long-drawn-out agony? I think he would have many excuses for dying even before mounting the cross!

4.

Lucian, *Prometheus* 1

[1] *Hermes*: Well, Hephaestus, here is the Caucasus, where this poor Titan will have to be **nailed up**. Now then let us look about for a suitable rock, if there is a place anywhere that has no snow on it, **so that the irons may be riveted in more firmly and he may be in full sight of everybody as he hangs there**.

Hephaestus: Yes, let's look about, *Hermes*: we mustn't **crucify** him low and close to the ground for fear that men, his own handwork, may come to his aid, nor yet on the summit, either, for he would be out of sight from below. Suppose we **crucify** him half way up, somewhere hereabouts over the ravine, **with his hands outstretched from this rock to that one?**

B. Summary

1. Crucifixion was reserved primarily for thieves, slaves, and rebels — not for Roman citizens.
2. Scourging and mutilation often preceded crucifixion. And crucifixion could employ nails and outstretched arms. These things help verify the Gospels' accounts of Jesus' death.
3. Crucifixion was a long and very painful way to die, which was designed to produce shame.

IV. Crucifixion in Palestine:

A. A lot of people were crucified in Judea.

1.

Josephus, *Jewish War* 2.75

Varus now detached part of his army to scour the country in search of the authors of the insurrection, many of whom were brought in. Those who appeared to be the less turbulent individuals he imprisoned; the most culpable, in number about **two thousand**, he **crucified**.

2.

Josephus, *Jewish War* 5.449-451

[The following concerns those famine-struck poor people who went out of Jerusalem to search for food during the Roman siege at the end of the Jewish revolt.]

[449] When caught, they were driven to resist, and after a conflict it seemed too late to sue for mercy. They were accordingly scourged and subjected to torture of every description, before being killed, **and then crucified opposite the walls.** [450] **Titus indeed commiserated their fate, five hundred or sometimes more being captured daily; on the other hand, he recognized the risk of dismissing prisoners of war, and that the custody of such numbers would amount to the imprisonment of their custodians; but his main reason for not stopping the crucifixions was the hope that the spectacle might perhaps induce the Jews to surrender, for fear that continued resistance would involve them in a similar fate. The soldiers out of rage and hatred amused themselves by nailing their prisoners in different postures; and so great was their number, that space could not be found for the crosses nor crosses for the bodies.**

B. Archaeological evidence

C. How was crucifixion perceived in the world of Jesus?

1.

Mekilta de-Rabbi Ishmael (Shirata 10)

The Lord Shall Reign. When? When Thou wilt again build it with both Thy hands. To give a parable, to what is this to be compared? To the following: **Robbers** entered the palace of a king, despoiled his property, killed the royal household and destroyed the palace of the king. After some time, however, the king sat in judgment over them. Some of them he imprisoned, some of them he killed, some of them **he crucified**. He then again dwelt in his palace. And thereafter his reign was recognized in the world. In this sense it is said: “The sanctuary, O Lord, which Thy hands have established. The Lord shall reign for ever and ever.”

2.

Tosefta, Sanhedrin ix.7

R. Meir would say, “What Scripture teaches — ‘because cursed of God is the one who is hung’ — is like two brothers who were twinlike, this one was like the other. One was king over all the world, but the other went out to the **robbers**. After time, this one who went out to the robbers was arrested. And they **crucified** him on the cross. And everyone who passed to and fro would tell the rumour that the king was crucified. Therefore, it is said, “...because a curse of God is the one who is hung.”

3.

Sifre Deuteronomy 221

One might think that they will hang him alive, as in the manner which the [Roman] government does; so Scripture says, “...and he was put to death, and you hung him on a tree.” (Deut 21:22)

4.

Philo, De Specialibus Legibus iii.151-152

(151) And since evil-doers do not limit their natures to offend, but they always perform immense things by exceeding [the bounds] and their wickedness they heighten and determine beyond any measure and limit, the lawgiver, if indeed it was possible, would on the one hand appoint myriads of deaths against them, but, since this was not possible, he ordained besides another retribution, commanding those who took human life **to be crucified**. (152) And, after ordering this, he hastens again to his philanthropy, being subdued toward those who had worked savage acts, and says, “Do not let the sun set upon those **who have been crucified**, but let them be concealed in the earth, having been taken down before sunset.” For it was necessary to raise up the enemies with respect to all the parts of the cosmos, so that they on the one hand be displayed publicly to sun and heaven and air and water and earth as punished, and again to drag [them] down to the place of the dead and also bury [them], in order that they not defile the things above the earth. (*LCL*)

5.

11Q Temple 64:6–13

(6-7) If a man will be a slanderer against my people and surrenders my people to a foreign nation and does evil against my people, (8) then you [plural] shall hang him on the tree and he shall die — on the mouth of two witnesses and on the mouth of three witnesses (9) he shall be put to death, and they shall hang him [on] the tree. If there is in a man a sin bearing a judgment of death and he has fled to (10) the midst of the nations and he has cursed my people [and] the sons of Israel, then you [pl.] shall also hang him on the tree, (11) and he shall die. And their corpse shall not spend the night on the tree, but you shall surely bury them in that day, for (12) those who are hung on the tree have been cursed of God and men, and you shall not defile the land which I (13) give to you as an inheritance.

D. Summary

1. There is extra-Biblical testimony to crucifixion in Palestine.
2. Jewish people shared similar views about crucifixion as other people in the Graeco-Roman world.
3. Additionally, Jewish people connected crucifixion with Scriptural examples.
4. There was some debate about whether it was legal for Jewish leaders to crucify.

V. A Crucified Christ:

A. 1 Corinthians 1:21-25

VI. Questions for Consideration:

1. What OT texts mention human penal suspension?
2. How has your understanding of these texts been affirmed or challenged?
3. How would you describe in your own words what it would have been like (associations, concerns) in the first century to have heard that Jesus was crucified?

VII. Recommended Reading:

1. Martin Hengel, *Crucifixion in the Ancient World and the Folly of the Message of the Cross*, trans. John Bowden (London & Philadelphia: SCM Press & Fortress Press, 1977).