

Crucifixion, Continued

Let us begin with prayer.

Father, as we come to You on such a glorious day, it reminds us that You are the Father who created the universe around us. We, as Your humble creation, deserve very little, especially in light of our sinful state, and we have been so cherished by the Creator that He stepped down and gave us His only Son to die on the cross for our sins and to be resurrected that we would have the promise of new life. In all these things we give You great thanksgiving in the midst of our joy. We ask that all that we do in all of our lives would be to Your worship and to Your glory. We ask that You would use this class in a small way to that end as well. In Your wonderful name we pray. Amen.

We ended last time by talking about crucifixion. I should warn you that I wrote my doctoral dissertation on crucifixion. That is one of the reasons why I have to go over this with you. More than that, it is very important that we understand the cultural context of crucifixion. My dissertation was actually on how crucifixion was perceived by Jewish people around the time of Jesus. We are going to look at some of that material shortly.

It is crucial not to just understand how Jewish people perceived it, but how the Greeks and Romans perceived crucifixion as well. One of the questions we have is what would it have been like in the first century to walk up to someone and tell him or her that you met the Lord of the universe who walked in the form of a man and was crucified and resurrected? That is so out of the mainstream that it would be a real shock to people to hear that. That is part of what I want to communicate to you in this lesson. It is very important that students who are going through the Master of Arts degree and the Master of Divinity degree have some contact with this material before they graduate.

By the way, I recognize that this is a fairly gruesome topic, and I apologize for that. After a year of study in Cambridge, they have a time when you meet with someone other than your supervisor and defend that this is a viable thesis topic. When I went to defend my topic, I was ready to explain why I thought no one had ever studied crucifixion the way I was going to study it. I had a lot of materials that I thought would be very important and interesting. The first question from the examiner's mouth was, "Are you sure you have the stomach for this?" Spending three years reading accounts of how people put other people to death in a very gruesome fashion is quite shocking. I do recognize that end of things, and I do not want to offend you. I have tried to tame things down so it is not too horrible.

When we finished last time, I noted that there was a penalty that was widespread in the ancient Near East. It was a formal legal penalty and also the kind of thing you would do in war after you conquered a city. Namely, you would suspend somebody. We talked about a fairly graphic drawing about the defeat of Lakish. The drawing depicts people who were impaled, which means that they were killed by being stuck on a long spiky rod. That is probably what it looked like in the ancient Near East. That looks very different from outstretched arms and prolonged exposure as a means of execution. However, in the ancient world, the same vocabulary was used to describe all of these events. We tend to think of crucifixion as something that is on a cross-shaped object as a means of death. If it does not meet those criteria, it is not crucifixion for us. In the ancient world there were a variety of penalties that had to do with suspending people before or after their death. It was either a means to death or a consequence of their death. The penalties were all associated and grouped together. If you view it in those terms, you recognize that this ancient Near East penalty that looked quite different from what we anticipate Jesus underwent is still part of the whole picture. Genesis 40 says, "He will lift your head up from upon you

and he will hang you on the tree and the birds will eat your flesh from upon you.” That is decapitation, so the person is dead before they are suspended. To the ancient Jewish mind, this was still part of crucifixion. For example, both Josephus, the first-century Jewish historian, and Philo, the first-century Jewish philosopher, take this very passage, retell it, and mention this event as if it was a crucifixion. They use crucifixion words. The result is that this text was understood as a crucifixion text by at least some people in the first century. When we look at the next few texts of the Old Testament, we will recognize that the same theme is going on.

The next text that we briefly looked at was Deuteronomy 21:22-23. Let me read this again and mention that there are several very important interpretive issues here. This is a very literalistic translation of the Hebrew from the Old Testament. The way I translated it was in such a way as to make clear some of the difficult interpretive decisions. It says, “When there is in a man a sin bearing a judgment of death...” what is a sin bearing a judgment of death? That is a very interesting series of words in Hebrew. Part of the discussion in Judaism in our period is what kinds of sin merit this punishment that he mentions. “When there is in a man a sin bearing a judgment of death and he is executed and you hang him on a tree...” Notice the way that I translated it there. You have a series of clauses: sin bearing judgment of death, executed, hanging him on a tree. All of those are assumed as part of the “when” clause. It is just assumed that you are going to have people that you do this to. The rest of the passage in Deuteronomy limits the practice. I envision the Lord accepting a widespread ancient Near Eastern practice of hanging people after they are dead. But He curtails it in terms of how long you leave them hanging up there on the tree. He assumes that they have a judgment of death, they are executed, and you hang them on a tree. Notice that the tree clauses are in a particular order. There is the judgment of death, the execution, and the hanging on the tree. The natural way to read that order would be to understand the execution as being prior to the hanging on a tree. That indicates that the hanging on a tree was post mortem, after the person was dead. That is the natural way to read Deuteronomy, and I ascent to that. However, it is the case that in Hebrew this series of “ands” may not convey the necessary progression in terms of the punishment. It could just be a batch of things you do. So it was possible for Jewish people in antiquity to understand this as just a package deal. That makes it possible that the suspension is the means of execution even though the natural way to read this is that execution precedes the suspension. Verse 23 says, “His corpse shall not spend the night on the tree.” That is the limitation. Verse 22 is the condition; it says, “When there is in a man...” The “then” clause, the main point, is to curtail the practice by saying not to leave the corpse overnight. Verse 23 continues, “But you shall surely bury him in that day for a curse of God is the one who is hung, and you shall not defile your land which the Lord your God gives to you as an inheritance.” You need to bury the one who was hung in the course of the day.

One of the other major interpretive issues is the phrase, “for a curse of God is the one who is hung.” Let me point out something that is true about English, Hebrew, and Greek. The word “of” or what it entails in its corresponding syntactical form in Greek or Hebrew, is quite ambiguous at times. For example, look at the phrase “love of God.” What does that mean? In the Corinthian literature when Paul says, “The love of God compels me,” God’s love is compelling him. This is the love that God has for Paul. But we can see it another way, too: my love for God compels me. This is what is known as a subjective and objective genitive problem. The question is the directional arrow. “The love of God” could mean that the love is coming from God (God’s love for me) or “the love of God” could go the other direction as love coming from me (my love for God). It is somewhat ambiguous in that regard. God could love us, or we could love God. The issue all revolves around the word “of.”

If you ever compare a New American Standard (NAS) translation to the New International Version (NIV) translation, the NIV often tries to unpack what it meant by the word “of.” The NAS often just leaves the “of” in there and makes you decide what it means. We have the same issue here with “curse

of God.” Is the curse of God a curse that God performs, or is it that the person curses or blasphemes God? The issue is if God curses this person who is hung aloft while he is hanging or if there is some sense in which he has blasphemed God and therefore is hung. By being hung it almost is like there is a blasphemy going on of God, in whose image the person is created. That is an interpretive issue in the text. The Septuagint, the earliest Greek translation of the Old Testament, translates this as a curse by God upon the person. God is the one who does the cursing there. There was a lot of discussion in first-century Judaism as to what this was and what it was about. I point that out because we will return to this text later when we look at some Jewish texts, and we will see that that is one of the major issues with it.

Let me summarize this passage. It primarily limits a widespread ancient Near East practice. It is assumed that people are going to be hung, and you need to bury them within the day. The text seems to imply that the execution precedes that hanging. There is an issue as to why you bury the person right away, and it has to do with the person being a curse of God. We are not sure whether God curses the person or the person cursed God. Some have asked if cursing God is the sin that bears the judgment of death. One possible way of understanding this passage is that if cursing God is blasphemy then blasphemy would merit this kind of death, including the suspension. The import of that is that the Sanhedrin accused Jesus of blasphemy before they took Him to Pilate. So even though they did not actually conduct the crucifixion or hanging, they might have felt somewhat warranted in seeking that penalty because they viewed Him as a blasphemer, one who had cursed God.

There are a couple of other Old Testament passages that have to do with people being hung. In Joshua 8, and again in Joshua 10, Joshua has one of his opponents hung as he conquers the Promised Land. Verse 29 says, “He hung the king of Ai on the tree until the evening time. As the sun was going, Joshua commanded, and they took down his corpse from the tree and they flung it into the opening of the gate of the city, and they erected over him a great heap of stones, which stands until this day.” Joshua’s action sounds very similar to the action that we heard in the last lesson from the lips of Tiglath Pileser III. He took a city, took the leaders out, and hung them up. Joshua did basically the same thing with the king of Ai. The difference is that he took him down, which seems to be in keeping with Deuteronomy. Deuteronomy seems to apply to a legal context, but Joshua applied that to a military context. Therefore they took down his corpse from the tree.

As we go through these passages you should ask yourself, “If I were a Jewish person in antiquity and I thought of biblical examples of people who were suspended from trees, who would come to mind?” If you talk about Jesus the Messiah, who was suspended, can you think about any positive examples from the Old Testament? Or are the examples going to be in a negative light? The king of Ai was the very person who opposed the people coming into the Promised Land. In Genesis 40 the Pharaoh put the baker to death.

Perhaps the most important text in that regard comes from Esther. In Esther, people being hung on a tree, which is the phrase we have in the Old Testament for suspending people, is mentioned several times. One example is Esther 7:9-10, “And Harbona, one of the eunuchs before the king, said, ‘Even behold the tree which Haman made for Mordecai who spoke well on account of the king. That tree stands in the house of Haman fifty cubits tall.’ And the king said, ‘Hang him on it.’ And they hung Haman on the tree which he prepared for Mordecai, and the anger of the king was appeased.” Mordecai is a godly Jewish person who is a relative of Esther. Esther ultimately makes it to the court of the king. Mordecai effectively saves the king’s life earlier in the book but does not get fully rewarded for that. Haman is in charge of the court, and he hates Mordecai. His hatred for Mordecai is so extreme that he looks for the worst penalty he can come up with for Mordecai, and he wants to put to death Mordecai’s entire race, namely the entire Jewish people. In the course of the book, through Esther and Mordecai, the

whole trajectory of the book changes, and the penalty that Haman had planned for Mordecai comes on Haman. This passage is when the switch takes place. Haman had planned on hanging Mordecai, and instead Haman is hung.

The striking thing about this is that there are a number of first-century texts, including Josephus and some Greek manuscripts in the Septuagint tradition, that use crucifixion vocabulary to refer to this event. It is as if Haman was planning a crucifixion for Mordecai but instead was crucified himself. This would have been well perceived in the first century as a precursor to crucifixion.

Let us go back to our question. If I came and said that Jesus, the Messiah, was crucified and you were Jewish and thought through Old Testament parallels to crucifixion, perhaps the one that would most come to mind is the crucifixion of Haman. He deserved it, and he tried to kill the whole Jewish race. That is such an important event in Jewish life that there is a festival named Purim that celebrates the victory of Mordecai and the Jewish people over Haman. Bearing in mind the context, some Christian authors in the fourth and fifth century AD indicate that the Christian emperor at that point in time felt the need to legislate against the Jewish practice of Purim. Purim is a festival of revelry. You are supposed to be so excited that God reversed this penalty on Haman that you engage in great revelry. The rabbis debate just how drunk you are supposed to get. It has to do with whether or not you are able to recognize your own face in the mirror. According to the rabbis, this is a great feast of revelry. The perspective of the Christians on this feast is that Haman was hung in effigy on the cross. The Christians thought that they were making fun of Jesus, and they might have been. The emperor Theodosian, who was a Christian, legislated against the practice of hanging Haman in effigy during the festival of Purim. This connection may not have been lost in early Jewish people when they thought of Jesus, the supposed Messiah who had been crucified.

Let me give some summary statements. Suspension penalties were well known in Mesopotamian and Mediterranean history. This goes back to our discussion of ancient Near Eastern texts and drawings. This can also be seen in the Old Testament. The Old Testament limited the practice of penal suspension and associated the suspended person with the curse of God. Those are the major points that I want you to know.

Let us move away from the ancient Near Eastern context and some of the Old Testament texts. I am interested in looking at how crucifixion was perceived by Greeks and Romans, the pagans, in the Mediterranean world. Our primary concern here is how crucifixion was perceived in the world of Jesus. I am not as interested in how it was practiced. I am mostly concerned with what you thought of if someone told you someone else was crucified. Let us look at a few ancient texts.

Plutarch says, "Every criminal who goes to execution must carry his own cross on his back." This is indicative of a couple of things. First, a person who is going to be crucified is responsible for bearing his own cross to the place of crucifixion. We see this in the Gospels; Jesus carries His cross to His place of execution. More importantly, this text refers to the people who go to the cross as criminals. In particular, the main kind of criminal in the Roman world who was crucified was a brigand. This is a particular kind of thief, one who used violence. If you think of the story of the Good Samaritan, the man is walking along, and he is besieged by thieves or brigands. They come on him and beat him until he is near death, and they take everything from him. This was a great fear in the ancient world. In the city there was a decent amount of army and military control. But when you traveled from city to city there was always the danger of highway robbery and bandits. These people were not gentle; they did not just stick their hand in their pocket to pretend they had a gun and say, "Give me all you have!" They knocked you over the head and took everything you had. That is what brigandage was like, and it was greatly feared in

antiquity. One of the things that made the Romans so popular in antiquity is that they put an end to this. Their military presence was so significant that they would go after these brigands. The punishment that they had for the brigands was extreme in order to keep people from doing it. That is why they crucified brigands or thieves. Jesus was crucified between two thieves. The word “thief” is extremely weak. The Greek word there is a *lestes* or a brigand. These were probably violent criminals whom Jesus was put to death in between. Therefore Jesus says to the people who come to arrest him, “Why do you come to me as one who is a brigand?” He could already see what they were up to and their desire to crucify Him. Undoubtedly, during that time, Jesus would have been perceived as such a criminal by the mere fact that He was crucified.

Cicero says, “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 not a fitting word that could possibly describe so horrible a deed.” Cicero, who was one of the great legal minds of his day, was acting as the prosecuting attorney in the trial of Verus, who was a Roman governor. Cicero came up with all the heinous things that Verus did as a Roman governor in the midst of the trial. One of the most important examples of just how awful Verus was is that he crucified a Roman citizen. That was the issue because citizens in the ancient world would not go to the cross even if they did something terrible. It was viewed as too horrible a punishment. If you were not a citizen it was all right to crucify you, depending on how horrible the crime was. Verus broke with that protocol, so Cicero states it as a horrible deed. That shows you that it was the lower echelons of society who were expected to go to the cross.

Seneca was a Stoic philosopher. The Stoics believed that you live your life in a course with reason, and you do not fight against fate but go with it. If you get to a point in your life where your life is just horrible, then the most reasonable thing to do is to commit suicide. There were a number of Stoic writings about committing suicide. This is perhaps why people throughout Western history have viewed suicide with some allure. It possibly goes back to the Stoics even though we would recognize that it is a horrible thing to do. Seneca came up with an extreme example of the circumstances under which you would be foolish not to commit suicide. It has to do with crucifixion, and in the process he describes how gruesome crucifixion was. This is about as vivid as our crucifixion descriptions get, so I apologize. “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 tumors 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.” That is the kind of penalty that our Lord endured. It is also the degree of pain that was associated with the cross. It would be an incredible shock to think that this kind of person would be the Messiah.

Lucian was a second-century AD philosopher who wrote very sarcastic dialogues. In this case he makes fun of the traditional pagan pantheon of religion. He points out that Zeus had a major anger management problem. For instance, when Zeus heard that Prometheus had created mankind and fire, he got so upset with Prometheus that he hung him up on the Caucasus mountain range for an eagle to come and peck out his innards every day. He is a god; he cannot die, but that is what Zeus does. This is an ancient myth. Lucian shows how incredibly foolish this is because the fact that Prometheus made human beings and fire means that they can make offerings to the gods, which is what feeds the gods. So Zeus is upset because he is getting fed! It is incredibly weird. In the course of this text there are three characters: Hermes, Hephaestus, and Prometheus, who are all deities. The first two interact about this while Prometheus is suspended on the Caucasus Mountains. Lucian takes the whole thing and turns it into an act of crucifixion as if Prometheus is going to be permanently crucified and the birds keep coming after him. The context is that Hermes and Hephaestus talk about nailing up Prometheus. Lucian writes, “Well

Hephaestus, here is the Caucasus where this poor Titan [Prometheus] 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 everyone as he hangs there.” We learn from this both the use of nails and the sense that crucifixion was a public penalty. It was something that they wanted people to see. Hephaestus says, “Yes, let us look about Hermes. We must not crucify him low and close to the ground for fear that men, his own handiwork, may come to his aid.” You did not want him too close to the ground because he created mankind. They might have pity on him and release him. Nor do you want to crucify him up on the summit, for he would be out of sight from below, and you want this to be public. “Suppose we crucify him halfway up, somewhere hereabouts over the ravine with his hands outstretched from this rock to that rock.” Notice that crucifixion in this context is not pinning someone to a cross. It is pinning him to a mountain and some rocks. The Greek reads “from this rock to that rock,” indicating outspread arms. I emphasize that because *Vine’s Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*, an old treatment of New Testament vocabulary that is not very academically informed, argues that *stauros*, the word for “cross,” indicated a pointy object instead of a cross-shaped object. Interestingly, his view is joined by the Jehovah’s witnesses. Vine definitely did not want to side with the Jehovah’s Witnesses, but they agree on this. It is probably because of their opposition to the Catholic crucifix. They want to say that the Catholics got it wrong. Some of the Jehovah’s Witnesses’ literature notes that this very dialogue about Prometheus indicates that this is a pointy object. They stop a few lines before they got to what I just read. If they just kept reading they would see he had outstretched arms. I do not think that is the only way people were crucified in antiquity, but I think it must have been common enough in Lucian’s day that he expected outstretched arms for crucifixion.

Let me summarize all of this. Crucifixion was reserved primarily for thieves, slaves, and rebels, not for Roman citizens. Scourging and mutilation often preceded crucifixion, and crucifixion could employ nails and outstretched arms. These things help verify the Gospel accounts of Jesus’ death. I only gave you a few of hundreds of texts of crucifixion from antiquity that could support this. It is very often the case that you would expect someone to be scourged before they go to the cross, as happened with Jesus. Crucifixion was a long and very painful way to die that was designed to produce shame. I did not bring out some of the shame imagery that is in some of the other passages, but it is true. Part of that is because a person who was crucified typically was naked. Our Lord would have been crucified naked.

Let me pick an imaginary person to make my point. Let us say John is a first-century pagan, a typical Greco-Roman kind of guy. I go to John and say, “I know the person who is the Lord of the universe. He was crucified.” What is John thinking if he knows all this about crucifixion? He probably thinks, “What did He do to deserve it? He must not have been a Roman citizen. What a painful and shameful way to die.” That was really bad in a Roman context. This is not the kind of person John wants to follow. That is the scenario during the first century.

Let us talk about crucifixion in Palestine. The first point is that there were a lot of people crucified in the ancient world, and a lot of people were crucified in Judea. You might think of the cross and think only of Jesus. Someone in antiquity thought of the cross and recalled seeing dozens or even hundreds of people crucified in his or her lifetime. Let me read a quote from Josephus where he gives some deep background before the Jewish war. “Verus [Roman governor of Syria] now detached part of his army to scour the country in search of the authors of the insurrection, many of whom were brought in [including Jews]. Those who appeared to be the less turbulent individuals he imprisoned. The most culpable in number, about 2000, he crucified.” I will quickly admit that 2000 is a very round number. People have often suggested that Josephus tended to inflate his figures a bit. So 2000 is probably high, but we are not thinking just two or three either. A lot of people were crucified when Verus put down this insurrection.

That is another thing that the Romans did. The slave revolts that happened in and around Rome were of such concern that they used the most horrible penalties possible to put them down. At the end of the old movie *Spartacus*, the whole road into Rome is lined with cross after cross of slaves who tried to rebel so that they would not have to be possessed by their masters anymore. The reason they put down the revolts so fiercely is because if slavery stopped the whole economic system of the Roman world would have been undermined. So they could not let the slaves rebel. Another reason to stop a slave who was thinking about rebelling was that he might be the one who fixes your food, takes care of your kids, and gives you a haircut with a little knife in his hand. You do not want that person rebelling because he might kill you, among other things. This quote does not refer to that; it refers to an insurrection, which was also horrible in the ancient world for the Romans. If one province went into rebellion they might all go that way. They used the greatest possible force to suppress the insurrection, and they made sure that people understood the consequences should they try to rebel again.

That is what happened here. This is a very long passage from the Jewish War. It has to do with Titus, who became emperor. He was the son of Vespasian, both of whom were generals during the Jewish War. Vespasian and Titus were the people who provided financially for Josephus to write his history of the Jewish War. We recognize a possibility of bias here on the part of Josephus. The context is the Romans besieged Jerusalem. There was no food getting in and out. They ran out of food inside, and Josephus indicated that a mother ate her own child. It got that bad. As people tried to escape just to get a little bit of food, the Romans captured them. Here is the scenario:

When caught those who escaped out of the siege were driven to resist, and after a conflict it seemed too late for mercy. They were accordingly scourged and subjected to torture of every description before being killed and crucified opposite the walls. Titus indeed commiserated their fate, 500 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 the custodians. But his main reason for not stopping the crucifixions was the hope that the spectacle might perhaps induce the Jews to surrender. The soldiers, out of rage and hatred, amused themselves by nailing their prisoners in different postures. So great was their number that space could not be found for the crosses nor crosses for the bodies.

The prisoners were whipped. Josephus says that Titus felt bad for these people. Of course Titus is Josephus' sponsor. Hundreds were killed daily. We see the calculating side of Titus, and Josephus almost excuses his actions. If you dismiss prisoners of war they might fight you again. If Titus put some of his troops to look after the prisoners then his army could no longer participate in the siege. The Jews were at the walls of Jerusalem, looked out, and saw hundreds of their comrades crucified. They might have thought, "This could happen to me; maybe I should give up." That is what Titus was after.

This was not the first time that Josephus recorded such an action that was attempted in the Jewish War. Other people did the same thing. It seemed to be a common military practice, at least in the conduct of the Jewish War. Titus hoped that the spectacle would cause them to surrender for fear that continued resistance would involve them in a similar fate. You can imagine what it would be like to crucify hundreds of people a day. After a while you get tired of it. So the soldiers "played around" and tried out some new postures. That is what the Roman soldiers did. And they ran out of space and wood in the process. That is how many people were crucified around 70 AD, just a few years after the crucifixion of our Lord.

People often ask me what crucifixion looked like in the first century. It probably varied in its practice. There might have been a general way that it was done, but this text shows that the Roman soldiers had a

little bit of latitude in terms of the way they would conduct crucifixion. To say that there was one standard way to do it is probably not accurate. Principally you would expect legal punishments to be executed mostly against men. But there are a few texts that may indicate that women were hung as well in different points in time.

We have archaeological evidence of crucifixion in Palestine in or around the first century. It comes in the form of a body that was discovered in an ossuary. The term “ossuary” became very popular a couple of years ago because of the discovery of the so-called ossuary of James, the brother of Jesus. An ossuary is a bone box. Burial space was not very available, especially around Jerusalem in the first century. In order to bury someone in and around Jerusalem you dug a cave into limestone in the side of a hill somewhere. Then you would dig out a platform, like a bed, and lay the body out on the bed. You may have seen images of this in various Christian books. After that person decayed, a lot of space was taken up unnecessarily. So people would take the bones and rebury them in small limestone ossuaries. You would have maybe two or three bodies in them, depending on how big the ossuary was.

An ossuary was discovered outside of Jerusalem about 30 years ago in a place known as Givat Hamivtar. It had a Hebrew or Aramaic inscription on the side that said “Jonathan,” and the rest of what the inscription says is debated. In that bone box the evidence of crucifixion was that the calcaneus, which is the heel bone, had a nail through it. On either side of the nail was wood. A wooden plaque on the outside of the nail probably helped make sure that the bone did not fall off of the nail. There was also wood at the tip of the nail, probably where it was drilled into the cross.

There are three different possible bearings that come out of this discovery. The whole issue has to do with whether there was only one calcaneus or two on that one nail. In other words, it is unclear whether both heel bones were there or just one. The initial study of this indicated the idea that there were two heels. A later study suggested that there was just one. The difference would be between whether the two were nailed up with a single nail in two different suggested positions or whether the person’s legs straddled the cross with two different nails into the heel bones. The other issue has to do with whether a scratch that was found on the forearm of the body in the wrist area represents a nail or whether it was a scratch that came about in the reburying of the bones. For those who say that it was a nail, then two positions indicate that the wrists were nailed. Another position has the arm simply tied to the cross. Based on archaeological study, those are our main options. Probably the most likely option of the positions is that the legs were straddled and the arms were tied. We cannot say that every crucifixion looked that way, though. That is just what that crucifixion looked like.

The bones of a dead person were reburied because it was a good Jewish responsibility in this time period for people to take care of the bones of the deceased. It was a very important thing to do, and families of every economic stripe would try to take care of this. However, it was expensive to own a tomb, and the purchase of a limestone ossuary could also be quite expensive. We see a wide variety of qualities of them. The one we just talked about was a very low quality ossuary. I have pictures of the high priest, Caiaphas’, ossuary, and it is beautiful. It is very ornate, inscribed, and perfectly designed. There were probably a variety of economic situations in the lives of people who had these. You probably had to have at least some means to own such a tomb and to have an ossuary.

It would seem more reasonable that if you are going to nail the hand or the wrist in crucifixion that you would put the nail through the wrist area. There would be more support in the bone from that. There have been some recent medical studies—one was released in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*. Those are the kinds of conclusions that they come to. I am not sufficiently adept at understanding the complexities of the human anatomy to know for sure about that. The Bible indicates

that Jesus' hands were nailed. In Greek the hand does not necessarily stop at the wrist; it can continue up the forearm. It is certainly possible in Greek that a nail happened at the wrist as opposed to the hand. We cannot tell based on the textual evidence.

Let me go over a few rabbinic and Jewish texts to show what Jewish people in antiquity thought of crucifixion. We already know that they saw a lot of crucifixions. It is not surprising that crucifixion became a metaphor that could be used in parables. We will look at a parable that is told by a rabbi. The text is an ancient rabbinic commentary on Exodus called the Makilta. The phrase from Exodus is this: "The Lord shall reign." The understanding is that this refers to the rebuilding of the temple. Remember that this is a text that happened after the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD. The question is when the Lord will reign. He says, "When Thou [the Lord] will again build it [the temple] 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, 'In the sanctuary, Oh Lord, which Thy hands have established, the Lord shall reign forever and ever.'" Robbers came into the king's palace, killed everyone, and destroyed the palace. In the parable the palace is possibly the temple. The people are pictured as robbers, who are brigands. You expect brigands to be crucified. They come into the household and destroy everything of the king including the palace, which is the temple. The king is God Almighty. You would expect the king to respond like he did, especially with brigands in such a situation. What is fascinating about this passage is that, in a parable, the rabbis simply assume that brigands are crucified. That shows that Jewish people continued this Greco-Roman notion that if you were a brigand you would be crucified. Second, they are able to use the image of crucifixion as an image of the kind of eschatological recompense God will have against the Romans. It is very shocking that basically in this parable, God is doing the crucifying.

The rabbi tries to understand the passage in Deuteronomy about the curse of God. He uses this image, "What scripture teaches 'because cursed of God is the one who was hung' is like two brothers who were twin like, the 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 a cross. Everyone who passed to and fro would tell the rumor that the king was crucified. Therefore it is said 'because cursed of God is the one who was hung.'" These are identical brothers where one is a king and the other is a brigand. The thief is captured and crucified because that is what you do with brigands. This is a very interesting rabbinic interpretation of "curse of God" because it implies the image of God to a human being who is hung up on a tree. People look up and say, "That looks like God Himself in some respects." Therefore they think God Himself in some sense is being so shamed and cursed. Thus it looks like a curse of God. This shows you that the rabbis were willing to use crucifixion in their various parables. However, when they got to legal pronouncements in the Deuteronomy text, they distanced it from the crucifixion practices of the Romans.

The Sifre Deuteronomy is a legal commentary on the book of Deuteronomy from the third to fifth century AD after the time of the Mishnah. It says, "One might think that they [Jewish judges] will hang him alive as in the manner which the Roman government does [crucifixion]. So Scripture says, 'and he was put to death and you hung him on a tree.'" The rabbis argue that the order of verbs in Deuteronomy (the person is dead, then they are hung) cannot refer to crucifixion. There were at least some people who thought that Deuteronomy cannot apply to crucifixion. On the other hand Philo applies the Deuteronomy passage to people who were crucified. He says, "God Himself commands those who took human life to be crucified. After ordering this He hastens again to His love of mankind, His philanthropy, being

subdued toward those who had worked savage acts and He says, ‘Do not let the sun set upon those who have been crucified.’” Philo thought Deuteronomy applied to the crucified even if some of the rabbis did not.

This final example is from a Dead Sea Scroll antedating the time of Jesus by a couple hundred years. It seeks to understand Deuteronomy, and there are two key parts. The bulk of the additions to the actual biblical text have to do with spelling out what constitutes a sin bearing a judgment of death. It is primarily somebody who betrays God’s people to a foreign nation. The second thing that it says that is of interest is “the people who have been hung on the tree have been cursed of God and men.” That implies that God and men are bringing a curse on those persons. These people are cursed by God and men.

Let me make some summary statements about crucifixion in Palestine. There is extrabiblical testimony to crucifixion in Palestine. There is a lot of it, and a lot of people were crucified in Palestine in around the first century. Jewish people shared similar views about crucifixion as other people in the Greco-Roman world. In particular, they thought people who went to the cross were brigands. Additionally, Jewish people connected crucifixion with scriptural examples. For example, they connected it with Deuteronomy and Esther. There was some debate about whether it was legal for Jewish leaders to crucify. There was debate against it in the Sifre Deuteronomy, but Philo and the temple scroll indicate that crucifixion was what the Lord required in Deuteronomy.

Let me again use the imaginary man John as an example. He is no longer a pagan; now he is a good Jewish person in the first century. I come up to him and say, “I have met Jesus. He is the Messiah, and He has been crucified.” Some of the things John might be thinking are, “Is he a brigand? How could this person undergo the curse of God? Was he a blasphemer, or was he being cursed by God? How could he look like Haman, the very person who tried to put God’s people to death?” At the same time John might also know some rebels who were crucified. He might have thought they were doing the right thing in rebelling against Rome. He might think favorably of Jesus as a rebel. I have to clarify those problems of what he might believe. Do you see how hard it would have been for first-century Christians to proclaim a crucified Jesus? Little wonder it is that Paul, in 1 Corinthians, says, “For since in the wisdom of God the world, through its wisdom, did not come to know God, God was well pleased through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believed. For indeed Jews asked for signs and Greeks searched for wisdom, but we preached Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block and to Gentiles foolishness, but to those who were called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God because the foolishness of God is wiser than men and the weakness of God is stronger than men.” Paul did not shirk from preaching Christ crucified. He did not just say that He was dead, but he proclaimed Him as crucified even though he recognized that, to the Gentiles, it would be foolishness. A brigand, a rebel, a lower member of society? How could this person be someone whom we would listen to? To Jews it was a stumbling block. In addition to all those brigand/rebel issues, how could He be cursed of God? How could He be like Haman? That is some of the situation there.

In the ancient world a “triumph” would be when a great general had just won a victory. They would get to lead the captives in procession. They would also carry some of the plunder from the temples and palaces and walk through Rome. That is the triumph and public spectacle that was there. Paul associates that with the public viewing of the crucifixion of Jesus.

There is some evidence in ancient Judaism that Absalom being hung by his hair was equated with crucifixion but not a lot. I actually spent a couple of weeks looking into that when I was doing my doctoral research. I am not sure how much I would make of that. At the same time, when third- or

fourth-century Christianity became aware of the Absalom passage, they were a little uncomfortable with it. Absalom is not the greatest guy in the world, so they did not want to equate Jesus with Absalom.

Let me summarize where we are in the course. An author conveys to an audience in light of a cultural context, in our case a Greco-Roman Jewish context. We sought to understand the context in which the New Testament was written. We did it broadly by talking about the Greco-Roman world and ancient Judaism. We have now done it more specifically by taking one aspect of the context, especially that of crucifixion, and seeing the context in which that worked when Paul conveyed to the Corinthians about the foolishness of the Greeks and the stumbling block for the Jewish people. While the New Testament authors were writing in the midst of this cultural context, that is not the primary source for their material. The primary sources are Jesus and the Old Testament.

In the next lesson we need to talk about how New Testament authors understood the Old Testament. Eventually we need to talk about Jesus, the historical reality of Jesus, and how that influenced New Testament authors, both those of the Gospels and Paul, and also James and any other authors whom we want to talk about.