

Gustavus Adolphus College

CRUCIFIXION IN CONTEXT:

JESUS' CRUCIFIXION ACCORDING TO PAUL AND ITS SIGNIFICANCE TODAY

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of the Religion Department in Candidacy for the

Degree of Bachelor's of Arts

Department of Religion

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December 2008

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Ia. Introduction

If Jesus had been born in the twenty-first century with the same purpose that Christians believe he came in the first century C.E., would he have died in an electric chair rather than on a cross to reconcile humanity? An attempt to answer this question is futile since any efforts to do so would rely solely on speculation. The question does, however, bring up an interesting issue regarding Jesus' crucifixion and its significance to Christians today. Crucifixion does not symbolize to people today what it represented to people in antiquity. In the twenty-first century, Christians are so accustomed to the symbol of the cross that it has become normal to wear it as art in the form of necklaces, pendants, or tattoos. It has been suggested by the *New Interpreter's Bible* that Christians "may find it difficult to think of it [crucifixion] as what it was: a scandalous method of capital punishment whose modern counterparts might be the electric chair or the gas chamber."¹ Modern-day Christians are separated from the Christ-event by approximately 2000 years of history, and thus are apt to lack a proper understanding of how crucifixion was used and what it symbolized in antiquity.

What problems might arise as a result of this separation? One possible consequence is that modern-day Christians are inhibited from understanding the social connotations and symbolic meaning associated with crucifixion. Knowledge about the cultural implications of crucifixion would enable us to more fully understand what Jesus' crucifixion reveals about God and God's effort to save humanity. A more serious consequence that results when proper consideration is not taken by contemporary scholars in appreciating the historicity of the crucifixion is that they falsely conclude that

¹ *New Interpreter's Bible*. S.V. "1 Corinthians," edited by Leander E. Keck. Vol. 10. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 813.

Jesus' crucifixion was unnecessary and has no relevance to Christians today. Such a conclusion must be contested because it undervalues the message of the cross which is so essential to the Gospel.² An alternative to this conclusion, which will allow us to evade the consequences of a theology devoid of a historical foundation, is to consider the historical context in which Jesus was crucified.

Martin Hengel, author of *Crucifixion: in the Ancient World and the Folly of the Message of the Cross*, provides an extensive study of the historical practice of crucifixion and identifies how some Jews and citizens of the Roman Empire viewed crucifixion. Although Hengel's work is greatly respected in academia, he himself acknowledges that his study is incomplete. He admits that "now at the end I should really begin...with a detailed exegesis of the evidence about the cross in the writings of Paul."³ He continues, "I am breaking off where theological work proper ought to begin."⁴ This thesis is an attempt to move beyond Hengel's work and to pick up where he left off. It will draw connections between the history of crucifixion and Paul's letters in 1 Corinthians 1:18-30 and Galatians 3:1-14 in order to develop theological conclusions about Jesus' death on the cross. Although there were many socio-political groups that practiced crucifixion in antiquity, this paper will focus on crucifixion in the Roman Empire in the 1st century C.E. This area of focus is the most relevant because Jesus was crucified under Roman rule during this time period in approximately 33 C.E.

There are several questions driving the exploration of this thesis: Was Jesus' death somehow necessary as an atoning sacrifice? What does the crucifixion mean to

² For the purposes of this paper, the term "Gospel" refers to the good news concerning salvation and the kingdom of God as proclaimed to the world through the life and death of Jesus Christ.

³ Martin Hengel, *Crucifixion: In the Ancient World and the Folly of the Message of the Cross*. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), 86.

⁴ Ibid.

Paul? What does Jesus' crucifixion reveal about the nature of God according to Paul?

Two approaches will be implemented in order to address these questions: a historically-informed exegesis of crucifixion in Paul's letters and an explanation of the theological implications of this exegesis. The purpose of this study is to delineate the practice and sociological dimensions of crucifixion in antiquity so that Christians today can better understand the meaning of Jesus' death in its historical context. A fuller appreciation of the historicity of the crucifixion allows the reader to gain access to a wider theological picture which would have otherwise remained overlooked.

Ib. Introduction to Paul and the Problem of the Stumbling Block

Paul and his letters to Corinth and Galatia will serve as the focus of this examination. Even though accounts of Jesus' crucifixion are provided by the author of the Gospel of John and throughout the New Testament, this study concentrates on Paul's letters for two reasons. First, Paul was aware of how the cultural and religious perceptions of crucifixion affected the message of the Gospel. He explicitly addresses this issue in his letters as he works to make sense of a crucified Messiah. Because Paul was familiar with the cultural perceptions of crucifixion in the context in which Jesus died, analysis of his letters will assist in this author's attempt to do a historically-informed study of Jesus' crucifixion. Second, Paul's writings are important for the purposes of this discussion on crucifixion in history because Jesus' death is central in his letters; he believed the crucifixion itself was significant for salvation.

Due to the shameful social and religious connotations that were associated with crucifixion, it was difficult for certain Jews and Gentiles living within the Roman Empire to see Jesus' death—the word of the cross—as salvific. Paul identifies this difficulty

which Jews had with Jesus' death as "the stumbling block" (1 Cor. 1.23). Through the analysis of Deuteronomy 21:22-23, the Temple Scroll, and the Pesher on Nahum, this thesis will endeavor to explain the factors which prevented some Jewish communities from accepting Jesus' death as redemptive. It was necessary for Paul to address the problem of the "stumbling block" so that he could instruct new Christians on how to make sense of a Messiah who experienced such a scandalous death. Simultaneously, Paul also used the crucifixion to confront issues that new churches were experiencing. Paul specifically addresses these problems in 1 Corinthians 1:18-30 and Galatians 3:1-14. A historically-informed exegesis of crucifixion and Paul's thought in 1 Corinthians and Galatians 3 will allow us to understand Paul's view of Jesus' crucifixion in its historical context. Furthermore, it will enable us to gain a more complete understanding of the theological implications of Jesus' crucifixion. Crucifixion may be far-removed from the lives of Christians today, but its meaning is not obsolete. The particular form of death—namely crucifixion—that Jesus experienced is significant for understanding salvation.

II. Crucifixion in History

The Romans adopted the use of crucifixion as a method of capital punishment in order to humiliate, to punish, and to deter people from criminal behavior. As a result, crucifixion was viewed by the Romans, Jews, and by many other members of Greco-Roman culture as a very shameful and particularly offensive form of execution.

Before we begin the discussion of crucifixion under the Roman Empire, it is first important to note that in Greek literary texts from the 1st century B.C.E and C.E., the word "ἄνεσταυρόω" was used to signify both "crucify" and "impale." Impalement refers to the act of mounting a corpse on a stake by forcing the body through a fixed post.

In contrast, crucifixion refers to the act of fastening a body onto a post while an individual is still living and results in the death of the victim. Unless specified otherwise, the examples provided in this section discuss the use of crucifixion in which victims were systematically executed on a cross. Examples from literary sources of actual crucifixion are used in order to examine historical instances that are likely congruent with Jesus' crucifixion around 30 C.E.

The Assyrians, Phoenicians, and the Persians practiced crucifixion during the first millennium B.C.E. before the Romans.⁵ The Carthaginians later adopted crucifixion from the groups listed above. Martin Hengel, who has performed extensive comparative studies of literature from antiquity in his research on crucifixion, suggests that the nearby Carthaginians are the people “from whom the Romans learned” crucifixion.⁶ While crucifixion was practiced since the first millennium B.C.E., it was not implemented as an “official punishment for non-Romans for certain legally limited transgressions” until the end of the first century B.C.E.⁷ After officially adopting the practice, the Romans used crucifixion throughout their empire. The Dead Sea Scrolls confirm that in Palestine “from the time of Herod the Great until the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 C.E., the Romans crucified thousands.”⁸ Thus, crucifixion became a common form of execution within the empire.

Crucifixion was implemented as a “means of waging war and securing peace, of wearing down rebellious cities under siege, of breaking the will of conquered peoples,

⁵ Vassilios Tzaferis, “Crucifixion—The Archeological Evidence.” *Biblical Archaeology Review*. (January/February 1985), 48.

⁶ Martin Hengel, *Crucifixion*, 23.

⁷ Tzaferis, “Crucifixion,” 48.

⁸ James H. Charlesworth and Joe Zias. “Crucifixion: Archaeology, Jesus, and the Dead Sea Scrolls,” in *Jesus and the Dead Sea Scrolls*, edited by James H. Charlesworth (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 279.

and of bringing mutinous troops or unruly provinces under control.”⁹ During times of peace, however, the cross was “an instrument to protect the populace against dangerous criminals and violent men.”¹⁰ Although other forms of execution existed, such as “throwing victims to the wild beasts,”¹¹ logistically, crucifixion could be carried out more easily. It could be implemented in a variety of locations, whereas throwing victims to wild beasts “required a city arena.”¹² Thus, crucifixion was a convenient method for Roman officials to use for maintaining their power and order in the community. Crucifixion also enforced protection for Roman citizens from the miscreants of society.

In regards to the methods of torture and death that these prisoners of war, mutineers, and criminals were subjected to, one systematic form cannot be identified because “crucifixion varied considerably.”¹³ Each city and province where it was practiced adapted its own method of crucifixion depending on the availability of the natural resources needed. Wood, for example, was needed to create the beams on which men were hung. The historian Josephus wrote the following account concerning the scarcity of wood:

It was commanded by him [Titus] to make earth-mounds again when supplying wood was difficult. For indeed it all had been chopped down around the city for previous works, so the troops gathered other [wood] from about 90 stades away.¹⁴

Because the soldiers needed to travel a distance in order to get the necessary supplies, Josephus’ report shows that crucifixion was not always convenient for the Romans to perform. They had to expend extra efforts to gather the resources needed, such

⁹ Hengel, *Crucifixion*, 23.

¹⁰ Ibid., 50.

¹¹ Ibid., 35.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., 24.

¹⁴ Flavius Josephus. *The Jewish War*. 5.522-523, Vol. 3, Book 5 of *Josephus*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1957), 362.

as the wood, rope, or nails used to fasten the body to the stake. Crucifixion was also not expedient because it could be a lengthy execution; asphyxiation took hours in some instances and several days in others. Because crucifixion was not a particularly convenient method of execution, we can conclude that it was a purposeful and determined art form used by the Romans to make a particular statement to the public. The Romans must have believed the message crucifixion conveyed was worth the inconveniences because they continued to practice it regularly during the 1st century C.E.

Crucifixion was intended to be a method of torture. Hengel notes that during the execution, “the caprice and sadism of the executioners were given full rein.”¹⁵ For example, Josephus writes that under the rule of Titus (79-81 C.E.), a mass execution was performed during which “the soldiers, through anger and hatred, nailed those seized in other forms for another joke.”¹⁶ These soldiers nailed the bodies of the victims in a variety of positions in order to amuse themselves. While the process of crucifixion could involve a variety of methods including: flogging, ropes, or nails, singular or mass executions, suspension from a tree with horizontal crossbars or impalement to a stake, each crucifixion involved brutality and a severe amount of pain for the victim.

In addition to its use as a method of torture, crucifixion also accomplished several other purposes for the Roman authorities. Crucifixion was used to punish criminals for their offenses. Paulus, a prefect who served the Roman Empire in the late 2nd and early 3rd century C.E., identifies some of the crimes that people were punished for in his manuscript, *Sententiae*. Crimes which were considered worthy of execution on the cross

¹⁵ Hengel, *Crucifixion*, 25.

¹⁶ Josephus, *The Jewish War* 5.451, 340.

included: deserting the army, treason, starting a rebellion, magic, and giving negative prophecies about the “welfare of rulers.”¹⁷

Crucifixion was also intended to be extremely humiliating in order to shame the convicts responsible for disobeying Roman authorities. The slaves, resistors, and criminals who were crucified were “exposed to general abuse and mockery” by the public.¹⁸ Cicero, a Roman lawyer/orator, addresses the shameful nature of crucifixion in the speech below. It is important to note that Cicero made these arguments in the 1st century B.C.E., so his perspective on crucifixion comes from a period before Jesus’ crucifixion. Cicero states:

How grievous a thing it is to be disgraced by a public court...But the executioner, the veiling of the head and the very word ‘cross’ should be far removed not only from the person of a Roman citizen but from his thoughts, his eyes, and his ears. For it is not only the actual occurrence of these things or the endurance of them, but liability to them, the expectation, indeed the very mention of them, that is *unworthy of a Roman citizen and a free man*.¹⁹

This statement makes it very clear that certain Roman citizens believed free men were unworthy of being subjected to the shame and humiliation that was crucifixion. It should also be noted that Cicero was giving his speech for the “plebes,” or common people, and was trying to appeal to their understanding of the torture of crucifixion in order to persuade them to acquit Rabirius, the man he was defending.²⁰ This is an important feature, for it illustrates that the common people were also aware of the “horror and

¹⁷ Paulus, *Sententiae* 5.19.2, 21.4, 23.2, 16; 30b.1, quoted in Martin Hengel, *Crucifixion: In the Ancient World and the Folly of the Message of the Cross* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), 34.

¹⁸ Hengel, *Crucifixion*, 41.

¹⁹ *Pro Rabirio*: 16, quoted in Hengel, *Crucifixion*, 42. Emphasis added in this paper for discussion purposes.

²⁰ Hengel, *Crucifixion*, 44.

disgust felt at crucifixion.”²¹ The Roman populace recognized crucifixion as a gruesome and scandalous death, with which they did not want to be associated.

Another Roman orator, Seneca, commented on the cruelty of this punishment by attributing its use “to the worst of all passions, anger.”²² Seneca’s explanation of the motivation behind crucifixion is accurate, for it is confirmed in several other accounts of crucifixion. Josephus writes that Alexander Jannaeus “struck with anger that went beyond savagery” when he crucified 800 men,²³ and the soldiers who served under Titus (79-81 C.E.) “through anger and hatred, nailed those seized in other forms for another joke.”²⁴ Therefore, these sources indicate that anger or rage against a particular group of people might be one of the factors that caused soldiers and rulers like Jannaeus and Titus to savagely execute their victims.

The humiliation of hanging on the cross was made complete in death because “quite often its victims were never buried” but rather “served as food for wild beasts and birds of prey.”²⁵ The following passage from Josephus’ *Jewish Antiquities* tells the story of the demise of King Saul and illustrates that to people living in antiquity, refusal of burial would have been an ultimate dishonor:

And their armor was set up in the temple of Astarte, and the bodies were *impaled* before the wall of the city of Bethsan, which is now called Scythopolis. And when those inhabiting the city Jabesh of Gilead heard, that the corpses of Saul and his sons had been dishonored, terrible having been led to see them unburied, those most masculine and carrying courage going out...left...and having reached the walls of the city, and having taken down the bodies of Saul and his children, they also carried them away to Jabesh.²⁶

²¹ Ibid.

²² Seneca, *Dialogue* 5, quoted in Hengel, *Crucifixion*, 37.

²³ Josephus, *The Jewish War*, 1.97.

²⁴ Ibid., 5.451, 340.

²⁵ Hengel, *Crucifixion*, 87.

²⁶ Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 6.374-375. Vol. 5, Book 6 of *Josephus*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1957), 354. Emphasis added in this paper for discussion purposes.

Because the people of Gilead were horrified to see the corpses “unburied,” the bravest were willing to risk their lives in order to eliminate this dishonor and to grant the king a proper burial. It is also important to note that the Greek verb, “ἀνεσταύρωσαν,” is usually translated “crucify,” but here in this passage it means “impale,” which is to place the body on a stake *after* the victim is already dead. This is important to note because in many Jewish texts, “ἀνεσταύρωσαν” means impale rather than crucify; this will be addressed again in the discussion of Jewish perceptions of crucifixion. Even though the victim would already have been dead, the act of impaling his body symbolized defeat and dishonor. It is for this reason, and for the tradition of burying victims before sundown in Jewish culture, that the men of Jabesh rescued the bodies of Saul and his sons.

In order to maintain a structured and peaceful state, the Roman authorities also used crucifixion for the purpose of deterring crime. In fact, Hengel writes that “the chief reason for its [crucifixion’s] use” was to discourage certain behavior through example.²⁷ His analysis is logical because simply eliminating the delinquents from society would not be enough to enable the Roman authorities to maintain order in their empire. They needed to prevent future upheavals from occurring by warning potential rebels of the great torture and humiliation they would endure if they disobeyed the mandated laws.

The Roman manuscript below illustrates this purpose:

That the sight may deter others from such crimes and be a comfort to the relatives and neighbors of those whom they have killed, the penalty is to be exacted in the place where the robbers did their murders.²⁸

Since this document explicitly states, “that the sight may deter others from such crimes,” it is clear that crucifixion was intended as an example to the public of the consequences

²⁷ Hengel, *Crucifixion*, 87.

²⁸ *Digest* 48.19.28.15, quoted in Martin Hengel, *Crucifixion: In the Ancient World and the Folly of the Message of the Cross* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), 50.

of disobedience. Another example comes from the late 60s of the first century C.E., when Titus “built a wall around Jerusalem and crucified” many Jews each day during the Jewish wars to warn all the Jews still fighting of the consequences of their actions:²⁹

And indeed he [Titus] did not stop this excess [of crucifixions] from happening in order to offer them the sight, hoping that they might surrender being persuaded likewise.³⁰

In this account, the victim was crucified with the intent of influencing the audience who would witness the deaths. The desired outcome was to make the other rebels surrender. In the examples above, the crucifixion was either carried out “in the place where the robbers did their murders”³¹ or “before the wall” (πρὸ τοῦ τείχους).³² The phrase “before the walls” refers to the area near the gates guarding the city. These locations were very public in order to ensure that the crucifixion could be witnessed by the greatest possible number of people. Quintillian, a Roman rhetorician, confirmed that “crosses ought to be set up on the busiest roads.”³³ In addition to crossroads and the place of the victim’s crime, executions also took place “in the theater and on high ground”³⁴ in the city to increase the likelihood that the criminal would be seen. The more public the execution, the more powerful the message.

Crucifixion was also a humiliating and shameful death because it was associated with slavery. Upon its original implementation in Rome, the practice of hanging people on trees was used to “punish, humiliate, and frighten disobedient slaves,” but it “did not

²⁹ James H. Charlesworth and Joe Zias. “Crucifixion” 279.

³⁰ Josephus, *The Jewish War*, 5.450 . Vol. 3, Book 5 of *Josephus*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1957), 340.

³¹ *Digest* 48.19.28.15

³² Josephus, *The Jewish War* 5.289, 290.

³³ Hengel, *Crucifixion*, 50.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 87.

necessarily result in death” until later in the first century B.C.³⁵ Because it was originally used to punish slaves, crucifixion earned the title *servile supplicium*, which means, “slave’s punishment.”³⁶ The term, “slave’s punishment,” is used in several Roman texts written by the following men: Valerius Maximus (14-37 C.E.), Tacitus (56-117 C.E), two authors of the *Historia Augusta*, Livy, and Plautus (250-184 B.C.E).³⁷ Each of these authors documents accounts of the crucifixion of slaves, and Tacitus even notes that “there was a special place in Rome for the punishment of slaves.”³⁸ Together, these authors “suggest that from the state side, crucifixion was practiced above all as a deterrent against trouble among slaves.”³⁹ The frequency with which this title is used in Roman literature from antiquity indicates that the “slave’s punishment” was a common term, at least for orators and historians in the Roman Empire. Thus, in its original use in Rome, crucifixion was a sentence associated with slaves.

The “slave’s punishment” transformed into a method of execution in the Roman Empire and began to be used on a regular basis to punish criminals. There are three specific accounts in Josephus’ writings which address the frequency with which crucifixion was used. There was a time under Titus’ rule when “500 or also more are being seized each day.”⁴⁰ Josephus continues to write that “the mass was so great, it was in need of space for the crosses, and the crosses for the bodies.”⁴¹ Similarly, the Roman

³⁵ Tzaferis, “Crucifixion,” 48.

³⁶ Hengel, *Crucifixion*, 51.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Tacitus, *Annals* 15.60.1, quoted in Martin Hengel, *Crucifixion: In the Ancient World and the Folly of the Message of the Cross* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), 54.

³⁹ Hengel, *Crucifixion*, 54.

⁴⁰ Josephus, *The Jewish War* 5.450, 340.

⁴¹ Ibid. 5.451, 340.

leader Varus crucified 2000 men at once.⁴² Certain Jews were also willing to use crucifixion as well in order to establish their power. Josephus also writes of Alexander Jannaeus, a Jewish king of Judea in the early 1st century B.C.E., who “crucified 800 of those seized in the midst of the city.”⁴³ These stories provide evidence of mass executions. Even if Josephus’ numbers are exaggerated, the texts still show that during the end of the 1st century B.C.E. and in the early 1st century C.E., crucifixion was used quite commonly by Roman officials and rulers.

The examination of how crucifixion was developed, how it was practiced, and what it symbolized in antiquity, reveals that crucifixion was adopted by the Romans to punish and humiliate victims. By using crucifixion as a tool to deter criminal activity, authorities hoped to maintain control over the public. Based on this analysis, then, what cultural associations might a Roman citizen have made from the fact that Jesus was crucified? They could have assumed that he was a non-Roman, a colonized person in one of the many territories which the Romans ruled, because the majority of people crucified were slaves, foreigners, or those not protected under the status of Roman citizenship. It is also possible that Romans could have considered him to be a revolutionary, a magician, or perhaps a dangerous criminal since these were the types of people whom a Roman would expect to be crucified. Regardless of whether citizens assumed him to be a revolutionary, a magician, a criminal, or a non-Roman, his death certainly would have been considered very shameful and offensive.

⁴² Josephus, *The Jewish War*, 2.75.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 1.97.

IIb. Crucifixion in History and Jesus' Crucifixion in the Gospels

Although the Greco-Roman sources discussed above show how crucifixion was used in history, we should not overlook the New Testament narratives which are also helpful for understanding crucifixion. A comparison of the accounts provided in the literary texts discussed above and the Gospels reveals that there are several characteristics which Jesus' death shares with Greco-Roman accounts of crucifixion. The three characteristics include: crucifixions were carried out in public places, crucifixion was practiced in order to punish and make spectacles of criminals and rebels, and finally that the body of a crucified victim was supposed to be buried before the next day.

Crucifixions were performed in public places so that the victims could serve as deterrents against rebellions, disobedience, and crime. The account of Titus taking one Jew and crucifying him "before the walls"⁴⁴ (πρὸ τοῦ τείχους) is an indication that people were crucified near the entrance to the city to ensure that it was made very public. It also indicates the importance of the proximity of execution to the city. Because crucifixion was viewed as shameful within the culture, it would not have been acceptable to execute victims within the holy city of Jerusalem. Thus, people were taken outside the city. In the Gospels of Matthew and Mark, Jesus is "led out" to a region called "Golgotha" or "the place of the skull."⁴⁵ Scholars believe that Golgotha was most likely outside the city. Jesus was crucified before the walls in the sense that he was crucified outside of the city enclosure. Jesus' crucifixion would have been obvious to people passing by so that his death could serve as an example of the consequences of disobeying Roman officials.

⁴⁴ Josephus, *The Jewish Wars* 5.289, 290.

⁴⁵ Mt 27:32, Mark 15:22. New International Version.

The second similarity between the historical sources and the Gospels concerns the crimes for which people were crucified. Crucifixion was used against criminals guilty of treason or starting a rebellion because these crimes were considered to be a threat to Roman authority.⁴⁶ Likewise, the chief priests and the rulers of the people accuse Jesus of “stirring up the people” (Lk. 23.5) and “inciting a rebellion” (Lk. 23.14) to convince Pontius Pilate that there was reason to crucify Jesus. According to this text, rebellion was viewed as probable cause for crucifying victims. Jesus was also crucified with two criminals/robbers;⁴⁷ this account agrees with the Roman sources which confirm that crucifixion was meant to punish criminals like robbers and rebels. It is therefore possible to understand how people might have believed that Jesus was guilty of a crime like treason or rebellion.

Finally, the last parallel between the Gospels and Greco-Roman historical sources is the importance of removing the crucified body from the tree before nightfall according to the Jewish tradition. As the story in Josephus’ *Jewish Antiquities* about the men from Gilead who rescued Saul’s body shows, it was important to bury impaled or crucified bodies to prevent them from experiencing the ultimate dishonor of burial refusal.⁴⁸ The Gospel authors make a point of recording that Jesus’ body was taken down because “the Jews did want the bodies left on the crosses during the Sabbath.”⁴⁹ This understanding of the necessity to bury the body which had been shamed will become significant later in the discussion of Deuteronomy 21:22-23.

⁴⁶ Paulus, *Sententiae* 5.19.2, 21.4, 23.2, 16; 30b.1.

⁴⁷ Lk. 23:32; Mk. 15.27; Mt. 27.38. New International Version.

⁴⁸ Josephus, *The Jewish Wars* 6.374-375.

⁴⁹ Jn. 19.31; Lk. 23.54.

The similarities between crucifixion as described in literary accounts from antiquity and in the Gospels reveal that Jesus was subjected to an execution that was purposefully and methodologically tortuous. His death was made public so that his corpse could show the consequences of rebellion. This discussion helps us understand the horror and sociological implications of Jesus' death within the larger historical context in which it occurred.

III. Crucifixion in Archaeology

Literary evidence of crucifixion in history provides insight into how crucifixion was developed and who could be executed in this manner. Until 1968, however, there had been no archaeological evidence uncovered to confirm accounts of crucifixion found in historical documents. In 1968, Vassilios Tzaferis was asked by Israel's Director of the Department of Antiquities and Museums to examine tombs that had been uncovered in an area northeast of Jerusalem called Giv'at ha-Mivtar. During this expedition, Tzaferis discovered the remains of a crucified man. Even though the remains were not of Jesus and his crucifixion, the discovery of the crucified man at Giv'at ha-Mivtar is still significant. It provides proof of a crucifixion that occurred in Palestine around the same time as Jesus in the 1st century C.E. Furthermore, discussion of the site and remains found at Giv'at ha-Mivtar is important because this evidence allows us to visualize the crucifixion of an individual, revealing the true terror of this form of execution. Finally, the discussion will show the class-oriented nature of the practice of crucifixion.

Tzaferis' article, "Crucifixion: The Archaeological Evidence" documents his discoveries at the site of Giv'at ha-Mivtar and describes archeological evidence regarding crucifixion in the ancient world. Giv'at ha-Mivtar was a cemetery for wealthy Jewish

families in the Second Temple period.⁵⁰ The bones of the crucified man were found in an ossuary, which is a “small box for the secondary burial of bones.”⁵¹ It became customary

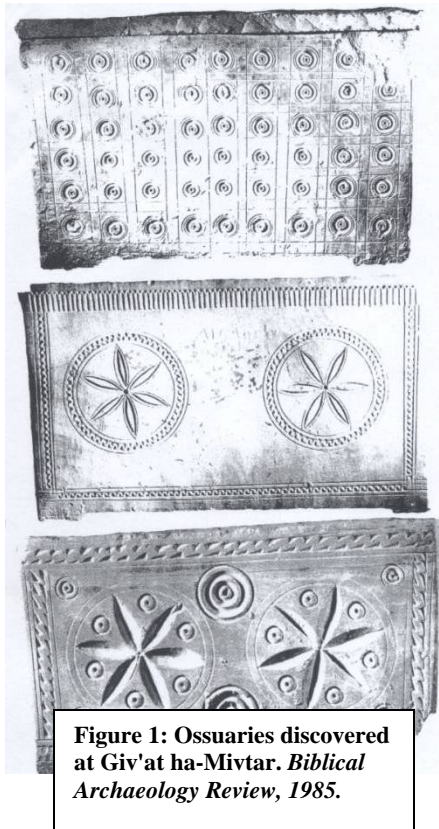


Figure 1: Ossuaries discovered at Giv'at ha-Mivtar. *Biblical Archaeology Review*, 1985.

during the Herodian dynasty (37 B.C) for wealthy people to “collect the bones of the deceased after the body had been buried,” and then to place the bones into ossuaries.⁵² Only a privileged few, however, were actually able to afford these ossuaries.⁵³ Figure one shows an illustration of the kind of ossuaries that were found in the tomb of the crucified man. On the ossuary of the crucified man, the inscription reads “Yehohanan, son of HGQWL.”⁵⁴ Based on the fact that he and his family members were reburied in such exquisite ossuaries, we can reasonably

conclude that Yehohanan belonged to a wealthy family. This supports the conclusion made in the previous section that even wealthy members of society could be treated as outcasts and be crucified if their crimes were worthy of execution under Roman law. It confirms the literary evidence that Jews were crucified in Palestine.

Because Tzaferis’ discovery was the first of its kind, it “aroused wide public interest and prompted a number of articles by scholars.”⁵⁵ For this reason, Joseph Zias and Eliezer Sekeles were given an extended period of time in order to reappraise the body

⁵⁰ Vassilios Tzaferis, “Crucifixion-The Archaeological Evidence,” *Biblical Archaeology Review* (January/February 1985), 44.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 46.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 49.

⁵⁵ Sekeles, Eliezer and Joseph Zias. “The Crucified Man from Giv'at ha-Mivtar: A Reappraisal.” *Israel Exploration Journal* 35 (1985): 22.

of the crucified man. They found evidence that contradicts Tzaferis' initial conclusions about the crucifixion of Yehohanan. Reference figures 2 and 3 throughout this discussion to view a reconstruction of the crucifixion of Yehonanan as described by Tzaferis, Zias, and Sekeles. During the excavation, Tzaferis found a nail driven through the right calcaneum (heel bone) of the man at Giv'at ha Mivtar and the remains of a wooden plaque, or board, on the end of this nail. In his reconstruction of the crucifixion, Tzaferis argues that "the two heel bones were attached on their adjacent inside surfaces...and...the nail went through the right heel bone and then the left."⁵⁶ Tzaferis' interpretation of the scratches on the bones led him to believe that the "feet were joined parallel" together on the cross.⁵⁷ Zias and Sekeles, on the other hand, contend that the man "was straddling the upright [cross] with each foot nailed laterally to the cross."⁵⁸ Their evidence for this conclusion is that the 11.5 centimeter nail found in the ossuary was not long enough to go through *both* heels and the wooden plaque at the same time.⁵⁹ This point about the length of the nail discredits Tzaferis' belief that both feet were nailed together.

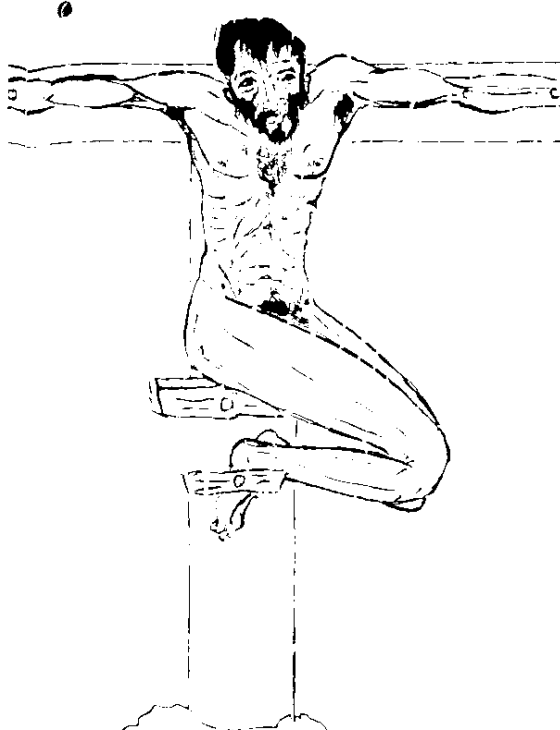


Figure 2: Tzaferis' Reconstruction.
Biblical Archeology Review 1985.

⁵⁶ Tzaferis, "Crucifixion," 52.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 53.

⁵⁸ Sekeles and Zias, "The Crucified Man," 26.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 23.

Similarly, another observation which the two parties disagree on is the method in which Yehohanan's arms were fastened to the cross. Tzaferis claims that "a small scratch was observed on one bone of the right forearm, just above the wrist," and interpreted that this scratch was caused by the penetration of the nail to secure Yehohanan's wrist to the crossbeam.⁶⁰ Sekeles and Zias, however, maintain that Tzaferis misidentified the fibula of the leg as the radius; the "lack of traumatic injury to the forearm and metacarpals of the hand" imply that the crucified man was actually tied to the crossbeam.⁶¹ Josephus

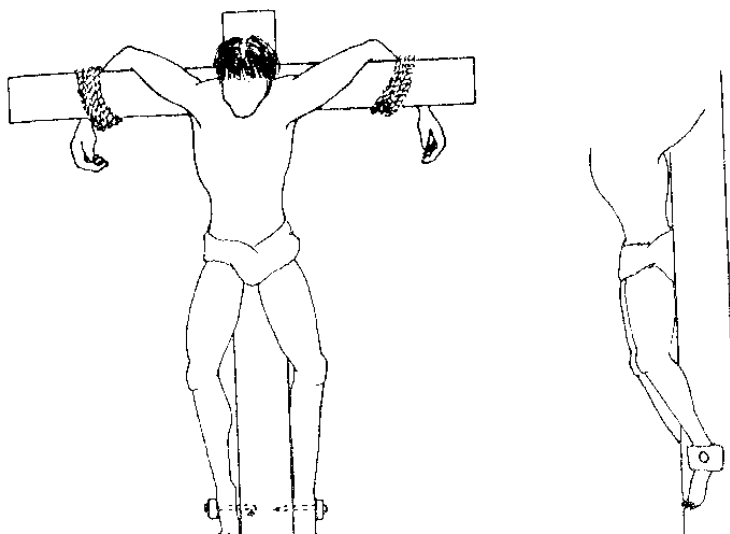


Figure 3: Sekeles' and Zias' Reconstruction. *Israel Exploration Journal*, 1985.

writes that "supplying wood was difficult [near Jerusalem]. For indeed it all had been chopped down around the city for previous works."⁶² Therefore, it is reasonable to believe, as Zias and Sekeles argue, that

victims were also tied to the cross in order to use the stakes and crossbeams more than once during a scarcity of wood. The figures illustrate just how horrific and gruesome the practice of crucifixion was. Zias and Sekeles were given more time at the Giv'at ha-Mivtar site than Tzaferis. They were also able to find more evidence and use more advanced technology to support their conclusions. For these reasons, their conclusions and reappraisal are probably more accurate than Tzaferis' and should be referenced for

⁶⁰ Tzaferis, "Crucifixion," 52.

⁶¹ Sekeles and Zias, "The Crucified Man," 26.

⁶² Josephus. *The Jewish War*. 5.522-523, 362.

the reconstruction of Yehohanan's crucifixion. The reconstruction itself is important because it is as close as those of us living in the twenty-first century can get to experiencing the terror that Jesus most likely experienced on the cross.

The studies conducted by Tzaferis, Zias, and Sekeles provide valuable information regarding crucifixion in Palestine in the 1st century C.E. The site at Giv'at ha-Mivtar is very relevant to the study of Jesus' crucifixion in history because it supplies tangible evidence that Jews and people of different socio-economic classes were crucified in Palestine in the first century C.E. As presented in sources from Greco-Roman orators, Josephus, and the Gospels, the evidence of the man at Giv'at ha-Mivtar shows that crucifixion was a determined art form used by the Romans to brutally torture and humiliate victims in order to warn the public of the consequences of rebellion. Yehohanan's remains also indicate the horror that Jesus most likely experienced on the cross.

IV. Interpreting the Law: The Influence of Deuteronomy

The literary and archaeological evidence discussed thus far indicates that Jews were exposed to the concept of crucifixion. We now turn to the discussion of Jewish perspectives on crucifixion. The book of Deuteronomy is the fifth book of the Torah.⁶³ In its most simple explanation, Deuteronomy is a "record of words addressed by Moses to the Israelites,"⁶⁴ specifying how they were to live in the community under God. Deuteronomy 21:22-23 played a large role in shaping how Jews in the first century C.E. who abided by Jewish law viewed crucifixion. Although Deuteronomy was originally

⁶³ Yigael Yadin, "Miscellaneous Laws" in *The Temple Scroll*, Vol. I (Israel Exploration Society: Jerusalem, 1983), 379.

⁶⁴ Peter C Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy*. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1976), 285.

written in Hebrew, the Greek text from the *Septuagint* is used in this paper because this is the text that Paul uses in his letters to the churches of Corinth and Galatia. The text and translation of Deuteronomy 21:22-23 from the *Septuagint* reads:

Ἐὰν δε γένηται ἐν τινι ἁμαρτία κρίμα θανάτου καὶ ἀποθάνῃ καὶ κρεμάσῃτε αὐτὸν ἐπὶ ξύλου, / οὐκ ἐπικοιμηθήσεται τὸ σῶμα αὐτοῦ ἐπὶ τοῦ ξύλου, ἀλλὰ ταφῇ θάψετε αὐτὸν ἐν τῇ ἡμέρᾳ ἐκείνῃ, ὅτι κεκατηραμένος ὑπὸ θεοῦ πᾶς κρεμᾶμενος ἐπὶ ξύλου; καὶ οὐ μινεῖτε τὴν γῆν, ἣν κύριος ὁ θεός σου δίδωσίν σοι ἐν κλήρῳ.

And if a transgression worthy of the sentence of death falls upon someone and he dies and you also hang him on a tree, / then his body shall not be left upon the tree, but bury him in a burial place on that day. Because everyone who hangs on a tree has been cursed by God; do not defile the earth which your Lord God has given you as an inheritance.⁶⁵

It is important to note that the Greek word “crucify” (ἀνασταυρόω) is not used in this passage; rather, the phrase “you hang him on a tree” (κρεμάσῃτε αὐτὸν ἐπὶ ξύλου) is used. According to Jeffrey H. Tigay, a Jewish scholar of Deuteronomy, verse 22 suggests that “a gibbet or a pole with a horizontal beam was erected and the dead man’s hands were bound and strung over the beam, leaving the body suspended.”⁶⁶ In other words, this passage is referring to the impalement, or piercing, of a corpse on a stake rather than crucifixion.

Scholars of Deuteronomy, like Peter Craigie, believe that the word order in this passage of “kill” (ἀποθάνῃ) before “hang” (κρεμάσῃτε) indicates that “hanging was not a method of execution but something that was done after the death of the criminal.”⁶⁷ The

⁶⁵ Deut. 21:21-23. *Septuaginta*. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft Stuttgart, 1979), 325. The (/) symbol in this line signifies the beginning of verse 23.

⁶⁶ Jeffrey H. Tigay, *Deuteronomy*. Vol. 5 of *The JPS Torah Commentary*. (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1996), 198.

⁶⁷ Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy*, 285. Contrary to Craigie, Yigael Yadin believes that because the author of the Temple Scroll writes “death is by hanging,” the author is trying to clarify that this is the literal meaning of the text found in Deuteronomy. A close examination of the Greek forms found in the *Septuagint* suggests that Craigie’s interpretation is more accurate.

purpose of hanging a corpse on a stake was to “degrade the criminal and warn others against similar conduct.”⁶⁸ This passage shows that while historically most Jews did not use crucifixion as a method of execution, this law would have made them familiar with the practice of publicly defaming a person in order to deter criminal or treacherous behavior. In the same way, it is possible that this law caused Jews in the first century C.E. to associate crucifixion with humiliation and crime. It will become important later when we discuss Galatians and Corinthians that Paul and the author of the Temple Scroll interpreted this passage in Deuteronomy to mean crucifixion rather than impalement. This interpretation influenced Paul’s understanding of Jesus crucifixion.

The author of Deuteronomy is giving instructions to the community of what to do with the body according to the tradition and the law if they impale it. The author uses the imperative mood to give the commands, “do not leave his body” (οὐκ ἐπικοιμηθήσεται) but “bury him” (θάψετε). Tigay writes that “denial of burial and exposure of the body to predators is often mentioned in the Bible as a grievous curse” and suggests that this perception could have developed because of the “folk belief that unburied find no rest in the netherworld.”⁶⁹ By leaving the body hanging, the land would be polluted “literally because the decay of the body, but symbolically because the land belonged to God,”⁷⁰ and corpses were seen as unclean by the community. For this reason, the warning, “do not defile the earth which your Lord God has given you as an inheritance” is given.

Another important aspect to consider is how God is portrayed in this passage. In verse 23, the author writes, “everyone who hangs on a tree has been cursed by God” (ὅτι

⁶⁸ Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, 198.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Peter C. Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy*, 285.

κεκατηραμένος ὑπὸ θεοῦ πᾶς κρεμáμενος ἐπὶ ξύλου). This is a very strong statement to make, for it claims that God himself disapproves and actually curses those whose actions are worthy of death and impalement. The word “curse” (κεκατηραμένος) is a participle in the perfect tense, so it literally means “having been cursed.” The word “hang” (κρεμáμενος), on the other hand, is in the present tense. Therefore, the difference in these two tenses implies that the victim was cursed prior to being hung on the tree. Craigie supports this conclusion, for he writes that the victim “is not cursed because they are on the tree but they are on the tree because they are cursed by God.”⁷¹ Victims who were deemed worthy of impalement had committed certain types of crimes against the community, such as treason, and thus had broken the law. Craigie writes that “to break the law of God and live as though he did not matter...was in effect to curse him.”⁷² Impaling, then, to Jews familiar with this text would symbolize not only extreme humiliation, but more importantly, being cursed by God.

The meaning of these verses in Deuteronomy will become significant in the discussion of Paul’s letters to Corinth and Galatia. This particular text refers to impalement rather than crucifixion. Nevertheless, Paul seems to interpret it as a significant section of the law that influenced Jewish perspectives on crucifixion because he quotes it in Galatians 3:13 in order to explain Jesus’ death on the cross. The scandalous nature of Jesus’ death on the cross was something that Paul had to address in order to explain the meaning of Jesus’ crucifixion to people who were familiar with the shame of being hung on a tree. Death and then impalement on a tree “was to die the worst possible kind of death” because being cursed by God “would terminally separate you

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

from the community of God's people."⁷³ As a result, it would have seemed foolish to some Jews to think of Jesus' death as glorious. Rather, if it was interpreted from the context of Deuteronomy, crucifixion would have been seen as a very shameful end, with which Jews, much like the citizens of the Roman Empire, would not have wanted to be associated. Therefore, Deuteronomy gives insight into the difficulties that certain Jews would have had in understanding Jesus' crucifixion in terms of the Gospel message.

V. Cursed by God and Men: Crucifixion in Qumran Literature

In addition to the Torah, there are also two writings from the Dead Sea Scrolls, written by the Essene community of Qumran, which present Jewish perspectives on impalement and crucifixion and how some Jewish communities interpreted Deuteronomy.

The Temple Scroll was written between 150 and 125 B.C.E. The law regarding crucifixion is found in the last large section of the Temple Scroll, and the section concludes with a revision of Deuteronomy 17 through 26. The Temple Scroll is both an expansion and a revision of Deuteronomy which was intended to provide an explanation for the legislation that is found in the original text.⁷⁴ The question arises of whether the Temple Scroll might have become a rival Torah for the Essene community, offered as an alternative or superior form of the Torah. We cannot confirm an answer to this question. We can, however, acknowledge that it is at least possible that the author could have intended this outcome because he expands the law that is given in the Temple Scroll in order to explain Deuteronomy 21:22-23. The passage which is similar to Deuteronomy

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Otto Betz, "Jesus and the Temple Scroll," in *Jesus and the Dead Sea Scrolls*, edited by James H. Charlesworth, (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 80.

and discusses “hanging bodies on trees” is Column 64:6-13. Below, Column 64:6-13 is set up against Deuteronomy 21:22-23 in order to compare these two texts:

Deuteronomy 21:22-23	Temple Scroll Column 64.6-13
<p>And if a transgression worthy of the sentence of death falls upon someone and he dies and you also hang him on a tree,/</p> <p>then his body shall not be left upon the tree, but bury him in a burial place on that day. Because everyone who hangs on a tree has been cursed by God; do not defile the earth which your Lord God has given you as an inheritance.</p>	<p>If/ a man informs against his people, and delivers his people up to a foreign nation, and does harm to his people,/ then you shall hang him on a tree and he shall die. On the evidence of two witnesses and on the evidence of three witnesses/ he shall be put to death, and they shall hang him on a tree. And if a man has committed a crime punishable by death, and has fled into/ the midst of the nations, and has cursed his people [and] the Children of Israel, you shall hang him also on the tree,/ and he shall die. And their body shall not remain upon the tree all night, but you shall bury them the same day, for/ those hanged upon the tree are accursed by God and men; and you shall not defile the land which I/ give you for an inheritance.⁷⁵</p>

There are three main differences between the two passages. The first difference is that unlike Deuteronomy, column 64 in the Temple Scroll outlines the crimes for which individuals would be considered worthy of the punishment of death. The first crime is identified in line seven: the crime of “informing against the people and deliver[ing] his people up to a foreign nation.”⁷⁶ These acts constitute as treason against the community of Israel because the individual passes secret information onto the enemy. This seemed

⁷⁵ *The Temple Scroll, Column 64.6-13*, quoted in Yigael Yadin, “Miscellaneous Laws” in *The Temple Scroll*, Vol. I (Israel Exploration Society: Jerusalem, 1983), 373. The use of (/) symbolizes the beginning of a new line. Color has been added in this translation in order to emphasize the difference between the writings. Black text represents phrases that are more or less identical to Deuteronomy 21:22-23. Blue represents phrases that were added in the Temple Scroll as an expansion of Deuteronomy. Orange indicates an alteration of the moods of the words in Deuteronomy 21:22, which reflects the author’s attempt to explain what he thought the author of Deuteronomy was trying to communicate. The sentences in Deuteronomy are aligned with their corresponding sentences in column 64.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

“so grievous to the author” that “it called for the special death penalty.”⁷⁷ The second crime worthy of the death penalty is identified in line 9, when a man “has cursed his people and the children of Israel.” Therefore, these lines are an expansion on Deuteronomy 21 since they identify the particular crimes for which people could be put to death in Jewish communities in the first century B.C.E.

The second difference between the Temple Scroll and Deuteronomy is the word order of “hangs” and “dies.” The Temple Scroll reads, “you shall hang him also on the tree, and he shall die” whereas Deuteronomy 21:22-23 reads, “and he is put to death, and you hang him on a tree.”⁷⁸ Contrary to Deuteronomy, the Temple Scroll implies that the victim will first be put on the tree and then die; crucifixion is the cause of death. As discussed above, Deuteronomy is referring to impalement rather than crucifixion. A possible explanation for the word order in Deuteronomy is that in rabbinic literature, a transgressor should first “be strangled and then put on the tree, not hung alive as the state does.”⁷⁹ The Jewish community was supposed to deal with criminals differently from the state in order to set the community apart. We see then that the author of the Temple Scroll was rewriting Deuteronomy 21 from a later historical perspective than I have been discussing and interpreting it in. By the period in which the Temple Scroll was written, the meaning of “hanging on the tree” had shifted, at least in some Jewish communities, to mean death by crucifixion rather than impalement of a corpse.

The Temple Scroll is indeed an expansion of Deuteronomy, so Yadin’s argument that the author was trying to establish the meaning of the Massoretic text is sound.

⁷⁷ Yadin, “Miscellaneous Laws,” 374.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 374.

⁷⁹ Ibid. 375.

Yadin's claim is supported by other scholars, such as Joseph Fitzmyer, who has written on the connections between crucifixion and Qumran literature. Fitzmyer agrees that it is likely the author "modified the biblical text and [attempted to] insure its interpretation."⁸⁰ However, a more controversial claim that Yadin makes is that "the author of the scroll altered the arrangement of the words in order to establish that...hanging is the cause of death."⁸¹ Yadin argues that additions were made to the Temple Scroll in order to clarify that the Massoretic text is condoning "death by hanging."⁸² For this reason, he disagrees with the interpretation of Deuteronomy that the victim was impaled after being put to death. While it is indeed possible that the author was trying to explain the meaning of Deuteronomy, he was interpreting it from his own perspective. The Temple Scroll does provide insight into how this Essene interpreted Deuteronomy, but this does not mean the author of Deuteronomy intended the same meaning. The word order implies that the victim was *first* killed and *then* impaled. Therefore, Yadin is incorrect to argue that Deuteronomy is condoning crucifixion.

Despite this criticism, Yadin's explanation regarding God's perception of the person who is hung on the tree is very thorough. The third difference between the passages concerns how God and society view impalement and/or crucifixion. Whereas Deuteronomy 21:23 says, "everyone who hangs on a tree has been cursed by God" (ὅτι κεκατηραμένος ὑπὸ θεοῦ πᾶς κρεμάμενος ἐπὶ ξύλου), the Temple Scroll reads "those hanged upon the tree are accursed by God *and men*."⁸³ The purpose of this addition is "to

⁸⁰ Joseph A. Fitzmyer S.J., "Crucifixion in Ancient Palestine, Qumran Literature, and the New Testament," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 40 (1978), 507.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 376.

⁸² Yigael Yadin, "Column LXIV," 289.

⁸³ Yadin, "Miscellaneous Laws," 373. Italics added.

explain the obscure verse in the Massoretic text.”⁸⁴ The scribe who wrote this is interpreting that “hanging is the penalty for one who curses.”⁸⁵ By committing the crimes of “informing against the people” and delivering the Children of Israel “up to a foreign nation,” the individual also “cursed his people.”⁸⁶ According to the author of the Temple Scroll, then, these actions constituted as high treason against the people of God. High treason in this case, however, is “not just a political crime but also a serious sin—God is offended.”⁸⁷ As discussed in the section above on crucifixion in history, crucifixion was used to make an example of people who had committed high treason against the state. Similarly, “cursing God and committing the sin of blasphemy...by delivering Israel to a foreign nation” is high treason against God.⁸⁸ This explains why people who were crucified in the 1st century were viewed by some Jews as being treacherous and cursed by God. The account of Alexander Jannaeus (103-76 B.C.E) crucifying 800 Jews out of anger is an example of a Jewish leader carrying out crucifixion as a punishment for treason.⁸⁹ Although it is a gruesome punishment, Jannaeus most likely believed that he was justified in this act because some Jewish communities believed it was the punishment that was designated as being appropriate for crimes such as treason.

In addition to the Temple Scroll, the Pesher on Nahum is also a text from the Qumran community that is relevant to the discussion of Jewish perspectives on crucifixion. The relevant passage is found in column 1, lines 7-10:

The Lion of Wrath ⁷[who has found a crime punishable by] death in the Seekers-

⁸⁴ Ibid., 379.

⁸⁵ Yadin, “Column LXIV,” 290.

⁸⁶ Yadin, “Miscellaneous Laws,” 373.

⁸⁷ Betz, “Jesus and the Temple Scroll,” 82.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Josephus, *Jewish War*, 1.96-98.

after-Smooth-Things, whom he hangs as live men ⁸[on the tree, as it was thus done] in Israel from of old, for of one hanged alive on the tree. Behold I am against [you], ⁹say[s Yahweh of Hosts, and I will burn in smoke your abundance]; and the sword shall devour your young lions. And [I] will cut off [from the land] its [p]rey, ¹⁰and no [longer] sh[all the voice of your messengers be heard.]⁹⁰

Scholars are in agreement that the “Lion of Wrath” in this passage refers to Alexander Jannaeus (the ruler of Judea) who crucified 800 Jews in 88 B.C.E. for betraying his army to “the Seleucid ruler Demetrius III Eucerus (95-78 B.C.E).”⁹¹ Unlike Deuteronomy, it is clear in the Peshar on Nahum that the men were literally crucified for their crimes because they were “hung alive on a tree.”⁹² Previously, it was a common assumption that the author of the Peshar on Nahum was trying to convey the “horror that the sect was expressing at such crucifixion.”⁹³ Yigael Yadin, however, argues that the author “vindicates the hanging...by the Lion of Wrath.”⁹⁴ His evidence for this argument is that the author uses the same phrase found in the Temple Scroll and Deuteronomy: one “who has found a crime punishable by death.” The author is indicating that Alexander Jannaeus, Lion of Wrath, was justified in executing “the Seekers of Smooth Things” because they committed a sin by “going around slandering their own people, and delivering them up to the alien nation” under Demetrius.⁹⁵ Thus, these Jews were guilty of treason against God’s people.

Once again, God is presented as being against the sinner responsible for betraying God’s people. Just as the person who is hanged is “cursed by God and by men”⁹⁶ in the Temple Scroll, Yahweh warns the sinner, “I am against [you]...and I will burn in smoke

⁹⁰ *Peshar on Nahum* i.7-10, quoted in Fitzmyer, “Crucifixion in Ancient Palestine,” 500.

⁹¹ Fitzmyer, “Crucifixion in Ancient Palestine,” 501.

⁹² *Peshar on Nahum* i.8, 500.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 502.

⁹⁴ Yadin, “Miscellaneous Laws,” 378.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

⁹⁶ *The Temple Scroll. Column 64.12.* quoted in Yadin, “Miscellaneous Laws,” 373.

your abundance.”⁹⁷ Because God condemns or curses the sinner in all three of these texts, it is clear that the Jews living during this period believed that God strongly disapproved of betraying the community. As a result, certain Jews would have been influenced by these texts to believe people who were crucified deserved to die because of their sin.

The Temple Scroll and the Pesher on Nahum are valuable because they demonstrate that some Jewish sects in the first century B.C.E. “interpreted Deuteronomy 21:22-23...in relation to the penalty of crucifixion.”⁹⁸ This is significant because it shows that when Paul quotes Deuteronomy 21:22-23 in Galatians 3:13 as a reference to crucifixion, he was not inventing the connection; sophisticated sources like the Pesher on Nahum and the Temple Scroll also interpreted Deuteronomy 21 in terms of crucifixion. Furthermore, these texts reveal that crucifixion was regarded by some Jewish communities as “divine commandment and as the legal penalty for high treason and blasphemy.”⁹⁹ Based on these conclusions, it is possible to understand why it was difficult for some Jews to accept Jesus’ death as redemptive. Texts like Deuteronomy, the Pesher on Nahum, and the Temple Scroll claim that those who died or were hung on a tree had committed high treason against God and God’s people. They deserved this death as a result of their sins. Those who knew these texts believed God had cursed the criminal. Therefore, “belief in a crucified Messiah was a dangerous superstition; it was blasphemy.”¹⁰⁰ What might Jewish scribes in Palestine have thought about the idea of Jesus’ crucifixion in light of these traditions? According to the Temple Scroll, the Pesher on Nahum, and some interpretations of Deuteronomy, they could have concluded that

⁹⁷ *Pesher on Nahum* i.9, 500.

⁹⁸ Betz, “Jesus and the Temple Scroll,” 87.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 88.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 89.

Jesus was a cursed individual who deserved to be cut off from the community. This cultural and religious context shaped Paul's perceptions of Jesus' crucifixion.

The next section will discuss that while Paul understands "blessing" to mean an inclusion inside the covenant, he interprets "curse" to mean being cut off from the community. With this understanding of "a curse," some Jewish individuals might have wondered: how could the Messiah have died a death that characterizes traitors who are excluded from the Jewish community? Paul envisioned Jesus suffering a death that cut him off from the community for our sake. When we consider how these texts influenced Jewish perceptions of Jesus' death, it becomes clear why Paul felt the need to address these concerns and to explain the meaning of Jesus' death in his letters to the Corinthians and the Galatians.

VI. Confronting the Stumbling Block: Paul's Explanations of Jesus' Crucifixion

The Apostle Paul was aware of the shame and the "curse" that was associated with crucifixion in the Jewish tradition. In his letters to new churches, he was required to rethink the meaning of the cross so that he could explain why Jesus' scandalous death was significant to both Jews and Gentiles¹⁰¹ who had become Christians. Paul was trying to use the stumbling block of the crucifixion to confront issues that existed in the churches of Corinth and Galatia. The cross was a new interpretive lens that Paul was using to think about the human condition and God. Two passages from Paul's letters, 1 Corinthians 1:18-30 and Galatians 3:1-14, exemplify how Paul confronted some of the

¹⁰¹ By the term "Gentiles," I mean the group of people who did not belong to the Jewish community or the Jewish faith in the ancient world. The "Gentiles" were of particular importance to Paul and his argument that Jesus' death, and therefore, the Gospel, was intended to benefit all nations/people, including both Jews and Gentiles.

problems within early Christian communities through the rhetorical medium of the cross.

VI (A) THE STUMBLING BLOCK: AN EXEGESIS OF 1 CORINTHIANS 1:18-30

In 1 Corinthians 1:18-30, Paul first identifies the obstacles that Jews and Greeks face in understanding Jesus' crucifixion. This letter was written from Ephesus to the church in Corinth, which Paul founded between 50 and 51 CE.¹⁰² The variety of backgrounds within the church congregation and its location on the sea contributed to the problem that Paul is addressing in 1 Corinthians 1:18-30. The leaders of the church in Corinth were obsessed with the pursuit of power, status, and wisdom.¹⁰³ Division within the church had emerged amidst this struggle for status.¹⁰⁴ Paul wrote 1 Corinthians 1:18-30 to address these divisions within the church and to show that God's plans run counter to human structures and culture.¹⁰⁵ The four major themes that will be explored within this passage include: the folly of the cross, divine vs. human wisdom, God's initiation of salvation, and God's mystery. Paul uses the scandalous message of the cross to encourage the Corinthians to align their values with God's and to teach them that salvation can only be offered through God, not through human wisdom.

According to Leander Keck, the "Gospel challenged the prevailing understandings of God...and...the human condition."¹⁰⁶ It was necessary for Paul to provide a new interpretation of the human condition in response to the Gospel, which he

¹⁰² John Barclay. *The Oxford Biblical Commentary*, s.v. "1 Corinthians," edited by John Barton and John Muddiman. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 1108.

¹⁰³ *New Interpreter's Bible*, s.v. "1 Corinthians," edited by Leander E. Keck, vol. 10. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 815.

¹⁰⁴ Roetzel, Calvin, J. *The Letters of Paul*. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 86.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 814.

¹⁰⁶ Leander E. Keck, *Paul and His Letters*, edited by Gerhard Krodel. Edition 2. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), 38.

attempted to do in his first letter to the Corinthians.¹⁰⁷ The cross became the new interpretive medium through which the human condition could be examined. Paul writes:

/18 For the word of the cross is foolishness to those perishing, but to those being saved it is the power of God. /19 For it is written: I will destroy the wisdom of the wise and I will thwart the discernment of the discerning. /20 Where is the wise one? Where is the scribe? Where is the skillful debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of this world? /21 For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom. But God takes pleasure in the foolishness of what is preached to save those believing. /22 Because Jews ask for signs and Greeks seek wisdom, /23 but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles. /24 But to those called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power and the wisdom of God. /25 But the foolishness of God is more wise than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength. /26 So consider your own call, brothers, that not many were wise by earthly standards, not many were powerful, not many of noble birth /27 But God chose what is foolish in the world in order to shame the wise, and God chose what is weak in the world in order to shame the strong. /28 And God chose what is inferior and despised in the world, things that are not, in order to nullify the things that are. /29 Therefore, let us not boast in all things of the flesh in the presence of the Lord. /30 He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who was born for us wisdom of God. Both righteousness and sanctification.¹⁰⁸

The first theme that will be addressed is the folly, or foolishness, of the message of the cross. We will focus on verses 22 and 23 in which Paul writes, “Jews ask for signs and Gentiles seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles.” Verse 22 is particularly important for our discussion since here Paul addresses aversions to the message of the cross, and the previous sections on Deuteronomy and Qumran literature were meant to offer possible explanations for why certain Jews had difficulty in understanding Jesus’ death as redemptive. Verse 23 is crucial for the purposes of this paper, for it is here that he identifies the groups of people who are behaving in accordance with the “foolishness of the world” (1.20). They are foolish because they fail to see the redemptive meaning in the message of the cross. He

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ 1 Cor. 1:18-31, *The Greek New Testament*. Fourth Revised Edition. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2001), 569-570. The (/) symbol indicates the beginning of a new verse.

writes that the “word of the cross” is a “stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles” (1.23).

The word “σκόνδαλον” literally means “stumbling block.” The term, however, also has a range of semantic meanings including “enticement to false belief or something that offends, repulses, or elicits opposition.”¹⁰⁹ According to the Biblical scholar, C.K. Barrett, Paul refers to the message of the cross as a “stumbling block” for the Jews because of the concept of incarnation. He incorrectly claims that this would have been a folly to Jews because “incarnation...means not that man has speculated his way up to God but that God has come down to where man is.”¹¹⁰ Because we do not live in the ancient world, we are not familiar with all of the cultural and religious connotations associated with the cross. As a result, it is easy for modern scholars of the 20th and 21st centuries to make incorrect conclusions about this passage in Paul’s letter as C.K. Barrett did. It is for this reason that I provided an extensive explanation of Jewish perceptions of crucifixion as represented in texts like Deuteronomy 21:22-23, the Temple Scroll, and the Peshar on Nahum. Thus, my historical work calls attention to the actual problem that Paul is identifying. Contrary to Barrett’s claim, the stumbling block here is not the incarnation, but the cross itself.

Based on the evidence presented in the sections above, some Jews would have perceived Jesus’ crucifixion as a scandal not only because they were familiar with the social stigma of shame and humiliation attached with such a form of death, but also because victims of crucifixion were cursed according to their tradition. All three of the

¹⁰⁹ *New Interpreter’s Bible*, “1 Corinthians,” 811.

¹¹⁰ C.K. Barrett, *A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians*. (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1968), 55.

Jewish texts discussed above refer to God either as being against the one who is hung on a tree¹¹¹ or as cursing the victim himself.¹¹² Therefore, to Jews who were familiar with these texts, the concept of a crucified Messiah would be “a dangerous superstition; it was blasphemy.”¹¹³ A crucified Messiah would also have been contradictory for certain Jews who believed that “Messiah meant power, splendor and triumph.”¹¹⁴ Crucifixion, on the other hand, meant “weakness, humiliation, and defeat.”¹¹⁵ This difference is the essence of the Gospel message according to Paul who believed “the career of Jesus was not marked by power but by weakness and vulnerability even to the point of death.”¹¹⁶ Crucifixion was the worst death to die because it symbolized permanent separation from God and from the Jewish community.¹¹⁷ Thus, Jesus’ death was also marked by exclusion from the Jewish community and from God. Such perceptions would indeed have made understanding Jesus’ death a stumbling block for certain Jews.

Similarly, Gentiles living under the Roman Empire were also familiar with the shame of crucifixion. According to Greco-Roman culture, gods were thought to be all-powerful, whereas Jesus’ death on the cross is quite the opposite; it is a death that symbolizes weakness. Therefore, when Paul claims that the “word of the cross” is “foolishness to Gentiles,” he means that it would have seemed absurd for a god, as understood in Greco-Roman culture, to willingly expose himself to such ridicule, shame, and weakness. Jesus’ behavior contradicted Greco-Roman understandings of god.

¹¹¹ *Pesher on Nahum* i.8, quoted in Fitzmyer, “Crucifixion in Ancient Palestine,” 500.

¹¹² Deut. 21:23. *Septuaginta*. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft Stuttgart, 1979), 325.

¹¹³ Otto Betz, “Jesus and the Temple Scroll,” in *Jesus and the Dead Sea Scrolls*. Edited by James H. Charlesworth. (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 89.

¹¹⁴ Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1987), Fee, *The First Epistle*, 75.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁶ Leander Keck, *Paul and His Letters*, 47.

¹¹⁷ Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy*, 285.

Due to these perceptions of crucifixion held by Jews and Gentiles living under the Roman Empire, it is understandable why Paul needed to address these issues in this letter to the church of Corinth. In this passage from 1 Corinthians, and also in Galatians 3, Paul is explaining how and why God would choose to save the world through a death that was so offensive to many people. The Jews' and Gentiles' inability to comprehend why God would save humanity through the medium of crucifixion is due, in part, to God's mystery; God's wisdom and God's works in the world are sometimes unexplainable through human understanding. The Jews and Gentiles whom Paul is referring to have limited human knowledge, which prevents them from seeing the wisdom in God's effort to save humanity through something as shameful as death on a cross. This is why they say the message of the cross is "folly."

The second theme that emerges from this section of Paul's writing is the distinction between divine and human wisdom. This difference remains consistent with the theme of God's mystery because it is this division which prevents humans from fully understanding God. As discussed above, the Corinthians' obsession with wisdom and status was causing division within the church. Within this passage, Paul is using the idea of the "stumbling block" to confront the Corinthians about their lust for wisdom and to encourage them to align their values with God's. In verse 19, Paul quotes Isaiah 29:14 as evidence for the distinction that he is drawing between the foolishness of humanity and the wisdom of God. Paul sees this Scriptural text as "support that what God had always intended and had foretold in the prophets, he had now accomplished through the crucifixion."¹¹⁸ In other words, the "word of the cross" which seems foolish to many is

¹¹⁸ Fee, *The First Epistle*, 68.

“God’s way of doing what [God] said [God] would do: set aside and destroy human wisdom.”¹¹⁹ Therefore, when Paul writes in verse 25 that “the foolishness of God is wiser than men and the weakness of God is stronger than men,” he is insinuating that the foolishness of God’s plan to offer redemption through a crucified Messiah is wiser than any way humans could have expected God to save humanity. There are many “who are perishing” (1.18) because they cannot understand/accept the message of the cross. Therefore, God’s act had “brought an end to human self-sufficiency”¹²⁰ on wisdom which they believed could bring them salvation. This suggests that the Gospel has a counter-cultural message to it; God disregards the value that humans place on intelligence and reveals his power in a crucified Messiah.

The motif of the inferiority of the world’s wisdom is also present in verse 20; Paul asks, “where is the wise one...the expert in the Jewish laws...the skillful debater of this age.” It is possible that Paul asks for these individuals because they would have been considered wise according to social standards in Corinth. Contrary to society’s view, Paul exposes these individuals as failures according to God’s standards of wisdom when he asks in verse 21, “Does not God make foolish the wisdom of the world?” The wise one, expert on the law, and debater each only has “worldly” wisdom, which is not enough to “know the wisdom of God” (1.21). It is clear by these distinctions that Paul believes the value-system of the Gospel is “opposed to the values of power and wisdom” held by members of the Corinthian church.¹²¹ This realignment of values rests upon the conceptual problem of a crucified Messiah. Paul is confronting the Corinthians with the

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 69.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 68.

¹²¹ Barclay, “I Corinthians,” 1112.

message of the crucified Messiah in order to illustrate for them that contrary to society, God does not value status or human wisdom. Rather, the message of the cross reveals that God identifies with those whom society condemns. God's effort to restore humanity to a right relationship through Jesus' death shows that God values reconciliation with us. By using the "stumbling block" and "foolishness" of the cross to confront the Corinthians' fixation with wisdom, Paul attempts to teach the Corinthians to realign their values with God's values as they are revealed in Jesus' crucifixion.

The third theme that is present within this passage is God's effort to save humanity. God initiates the act of salvation through the unexpected medium of Jesus' crucifixion. The Jews and Gentiles who are unable to accept the word of the cross are contrasted in verse 24-25 with "those who are being saved." The use of the noun "τοῖς κλητοῖς" or "those called" implies that God is the one who calls people to understand and to accept the message of Jesus' death. Therefore, the drive "for a relationship with God...moves from God to individuals,"¹²² not the other way around. God is the one seeking to restore the relationship with fallen humanity. This shows that part of the Gentiles' and Jews' foolishness was their attempt to understand God through human wisdom when it is God who reveals God's intentions to humanity. God is not restricted to human expectations of "calling" the most elite or wise; rather, God calls "both Jews and Greeks" (1.24). This distinction was meant to teach the Corinthians that it was not possible for them to bring about their own salvation through the acquisition of wisdom. Paul shows that it is God, not humans, who initiates salvation, and this is why it is foolish for the Corinthians' to lust after wisdom.

¹²² *New Interpreter's Bible*, "1 Corinthians," 813.

Because humans were incapable of obtaining reconciliation on their own, it was necessary for God to offer salvation. According to Paul, “God takes pleasure in the foolishness of what is preached to save those believing” (1.21). Scholar Hans Conzelmann offers a sound conclusion from his interpretation of this verse. He writes that God’s “attitude is now explained” through the Christ-event.¹²³ In response to the world’s inability to understand God’s action, God desired and even “took pleasure” in reconciling those who believe in the message of the cross. Conzelmann argues that because Christ was “born to us” from God (1.29), the “origin and direction of the event of salvation” is shown to move “*from God in Christ to us.*”¹²⁴ God, therefore, relentlessly pursues us, seeking to restore the broken relationship between God and humanity.

As a result of God’s “foolish” act of saving the world through a crucified Messiah, Paul claims that the Corinthians now have the “wisdom of God” and have been made consecrated (1.30). In this last verse, the word “δικαιοσύνη” means “righteousness,” but it can also be interpreted as “right relationship.” Therefore, Paul’s use of this word is not so much an “ethical term as it is forensic...[it is an] undeserved stance of right standing before God.”¹²⁵ For those who receive the message of Jesus’ crucifixion, they are literally “standing right” with God.

The fourth theme of 1 Corinthians 1:18-23 is the “Mystery of God.” The “wisdom of God” (“τῇ σοφίᾳ τοῦ θεοῦ”) in verse 21 is most likely referring to what Gordon Fee identifies as a “correct understanding of what God is doing in the world.”¹²⁶ Paul,

¹²³ Hans Conzelmann. *1 Corinthians: A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians*. Edited by George W. MacRae, SJ. Translated by James W. Leitch. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 45.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 52.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 86.

¹²⁶ Fee, *The First Epistle*, 72.

however, claims that humans are incapable of knowing this. This verse introduces the mystery of God; there is a certain inability for humans to comprehend God's wisdom and for some to comprehend its manifestation in Jesus' death. The Jews and Gentiles to whom Paul is referring to cannot understand the crucifixion because they are only operating according to human standards. While the statement that Christ is the "wisdom of God" (1.24) by Paul implies that it is possible for us to move past our humanness, Paul does not go so far as to say that God's mystery is completely resolved. Because verse 25 reads, "But the foolishness of God is wiser than men and the weakness of God is stronger than men," it would seem that Paul is asserting that even our most wise thoughts are inferior to God's. Thus, the reader is left with the sense that it is impossible to understand God's ways in their entirety; the audience is left with a sense of mystery.

As a result of his methods of persuasion, Paul develops a solid argument in 1 Corinthians 1:18-30. He effectively communicates that there is a counter-cultural message in the Gospel, and he identifies that the Corinthians' appropriate response to this message should be to trust in God, not in wisdom. If we hold Paul's teaching to be true in this section and believe the Bible to be determinative of what Christians should think, then this passage can be interpreted to mean that God is not interested in believers who seek only after knowledge and boast about their intelligence. We are instead to boast about the God who has saved people through the unanticipated medium of Jesus' crucifixion. God often works in the world in ways contrary to how humans expect. God does this to lift up the weak, to humiliate the strong, to challenge our perceptions, and to identify with the outcasts. God initiates salvation and, therefore, pursues us because we could not bring about salvation on our own.

In addition, this passage also contributes to the larger realm of theology in the area of epistemology. Paul is addressing the problem of epistemology in the Corinthian church. The Corinthians believe that their knowledge and human wisdom are enough to make them acceptable before the eyes of God and men. Paul, on the other hand, is arguing that human wisdom continually fails to please God and to bring salvation. The crucifixion, therefore, is vital for Paul and his theology because it runs counter to people's epistemological expectations. Instead, it reveals true epistemology of God and God's nature.

Although this passage is still important for us today in understanding the problem of the "stumbling block" and for understanding God's values as they are presented in the Bible, Paul does not directly state in this portion of the letter why the specific form of death that Jesus experienced was *necessary* for redemption. There is still a sense of ambiguity regarding the crucifixion itself. A more complete understanding of Jesus' crucifixion in history is gained when Paul's writing in 1 Corinthians is discussed in relation to the insights Paul gives in Galatians. For this reason, we now turn to the discussion of Galatians 3:1-14, where Paul uses Scripture to explain why Jesus' death on the cross was required for human salvation.

VI (B) TAKING THE CURSE: AN EXEGESIS OF GALATIANS 3:1-14

When Paul founded the church in Galatia, the Galatians "received his gospel with enthusiasm and revered the apostle himself."¹²⁷ When this letter was written, however, the situation in Galatia had changed, as is evident by Paul's reproachful greeting, "O

¹²⁷ Roetzel, *The Letters of Paul*, 97.

foolish Galatians” (Gal. 3.1). It is clear within these first few lines of this passage that Paul was facing opposition in the Galatian congregations. Some commentaries refer to the opposition as the “agitators...who had undermined some of Paul’s central convictions by confusing the Galatians.”¹²⁸ Other sources refer to them “as missionaries” who had infiltrated Galatia during Paul’s absence.¹²⁹ Most modern scholars, however, agree that those who were opposing Paul were informing the members that it was necessary for them to be circumcised in order to enter into the covenant God made with Abraham.¹³⁰

This history of the situation in Galatia is essential for understanding the argument that Paul is building in Galatians 3:1-14 concerning the law and the significance of Jesus’ crucifixion. The Galatians were unclear of what was needed in order to be included in the covenant with God, so Paul is using the crucifixion to address this issue. For Paul, being blessed meant inclusion in the covenant of Abraham. The opposite, then, was to be cursed and thus excluded from the community. Within the context of this discussion, Paul uses Jesus’ crucifixion to bridge the disconnection between curse and blessing: Jesus endured the curse of the cross and was separated from the community and from God in order to bring the blessing of covenantal membership to all people.

The verse that will serve as the focus of this discussion is Galatians 3:13, which says, “Christ led us out from the curse of the law, becoming the curse on behalf of us, for it is written: “Everyone who hangs on a tree is cursed.” As a result of this understanding of the covenant and curse, the specific form of death that Jesus died becomes very

¹²⁸ Stanton, G.N.. *The Oxford Biblical Commentary*. S.V. “Galatians.” Edited by John Barton and John Muddiman. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 1152.

¹²⁹ *New Interpreter’s Bible*, s.v. “Galatians,” edited by Leander E. Keck. Vol. 11. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 252.

¹³⁰ Roetzel, *The Letters of Paul*, 97.

significant for Paul's soteriology. From Paul's letter to the Galatians, we can identify three reasons why Jesus' crucifixion itself is significant for understanding salvation: it justifies people before God because the law could not, it removes the curse of the law from humanity, and it shows that God needed to initiate salvation because humans were incapable of doing it on their own. The passage below provides the context within which verse 13 is written:

/1 O foolish Galatians! Who bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was portrayed as crucified. /2 I intend to learn this one thing from you; did you receive the Spirit out of the works of the law or out of believing what you heard? /3 Thus, you are foolish, having started with the spirit do you now end by the flesh? /4 Did you suffer these things without proper consideration? If so, then also in vain. /5 So then, does God supply you with the Spirit and work miracles among you through the words of the law, or by your believing what you heard? /6 Just as Abraham believed in God, so also was it charged to his account in righteousness. /7 Know that those believing, they are the sons of Abraham. /8 The Scripture having seen that out of faith, God would justify the Gentiles and it declared beforehand to Abraham saying that "all the nations would be blessed by you." /9 So that those believing are blessed with Abraham the faithful. /10 For as many as there are working out of the law, they are under a curse; for it is written, cursed is everyone who does not observe and obey all the things written in the book of the law. /11 So that it is evident no one is justified before God by the law so that the righteous will live by faith. /12 But the law does not rest on faith, but he who practices these things will live by them. /13 *Christ led us out from the curse of the law, becoming the curse on behalf of us, for it is written; "Everyone who hangs on a tree is cursed."* /14 In order that in Jesus Christ, the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, in order that we might receive the promise of the spirit through faith.¹³¹

Verse 13 is the crux of this thesis, for it is here that Paul ties together salvation, the crucifixion, and the text from Deuteronomy discussed in detail above. Before we analyze the comparison that Paul is making between the curse of the law and Jesus' death on the cross, it is first necessary to discuss what exactly the curse of the cross was and what made it so detestable to some Jews in antiquity. Paul quotes Deuteronomy 21:22-23

¹³¹ Gal. 3.1-14. *The Greek New Testament*. Fourth Revised Edition. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2001), 569-570. The (/) symbol indicates the beginning of a new verse. Italics added.

when he refers to the curse of crucifixion saying, “Everyone who hangs on a tree is cursed.” The manner in which Paul uses this verse, however, strays from its meaning in the original text. As discussed above, the phrase, “everyone who hangs on a tree” (πᾶς κρεμᾶμενος ἐπὶ ξύλου) refers to the practice of *impaling* a corpse on a pole in order to shame the body and provide an example to passersby of the consequences of sin. Paul, however, reinterprets this phrase to mean “crucifixion” so that he can relate the curse of the law to the curse of the cross.

The texts of Deuteronomy and the Temple Scroll which were described in detail in the previous sections imply that *God* curses whoever is hung on the stake as a condemnation for their sins. Paul seems to omit the phrase “has been cursed by God” (κεκατηραμένος ὑπὸ θεοῦ) from the text of Deuteronomy and simply writes that the victim “is cursed.” Although this may seem like a slight difference, it is noteworthy because it was this claim that *God* cursed the victim that would have influenced certain Jews to view impalement or crucifixion as shameful. If it had been included, it would have given a very different meaning to the letter, for it would imply that God had cursed the Messiah. It is possible that Paul desired to draw the connection with the curse of the law and the curse mentioned in the Torah while avoiding the implication that God had cursed Jesus. These differences in phrasing between Galatians 3:13 and Deuteronomy 21:23 show that Paul took some creative liberties in his interpretation in order to support his claims regarding Jesus and the law. Paul’s use of Deuteronomy 21:22-23 in this section also shows that he associated the cross with the judgment placed on law breakers. Thus, Paul was interpreting Jesus’ death through his own Jewish cultural and religious perspectives. In his commentary on Deuteronomy, Peter Craigie writes that a cursed

death was the worst kind of death to die according to the Jewish tradition because it meant separation from God and the community.¹³² The curse, then, to which Paul is referring to in verse 13, is the curse of exclusion from the community and of permanent separation from God. It is this threat of permanent separation and humiliation that makes the “curse” so terrible.

Now that the seriousness of the curse has been established, we turn to the discussion of Paul’s understanding of the law in relation to the curse of crucifixion and God’s response to this curse. We will also discuss why the Christ-event is significant for understanding salvation according to Paul. The first reason the crucifixion is significant is because it was not possible for humanity to be justified through the law. Paul argues that humans needed another medium through which reconciliation could be offered.

It is important to note that Paul’s arguments against the law in this section result from his understanding of the human condition. Because this passage from Galatians discusses reconciliation with God, Paul assumes that reconciliation is needed and that “the human condition is alienated with respect to God.”¹³³ According to Paul, there are two aspects of the human dilemma. The first is that humans “cannot produce a right relation to God,” and the second is that they “cannot overcome the tyranny of death or mortality.”¹³⁴ Paul writes that everyone who depends on the “Law is cursed” (3.10). In this example, Paul is referencing Deuteronomy 27:26, which reads: “Every man is cursed, who does not himself continue to do everything according to the words of this law.”¹³⁵ Many scholars criticize Paul’s usage of this text as being “unfaithful...to the

¹³² Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy*, 285.

¹³³ Keck, *Paul and His Letters*, 49.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 116.

¹³⁵ Deut. 27:26. *Septuaginta*. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft Stuttgart, 1979), 335.

original intent of the Genesis material.”¹³⁶ Whereas the author of Deuteronomy 27:26 claims that there is a curse “on anyone who does not do what the law requires,” Paul seems to be arguing the opposite: “those who conscientiously do what the law requires are cursed.”¹³⁷ The author of the text in Deuteronomy was warning members of the community to *live* according to the law in order to avoid the consequences of sin, but Paul is warning the congregation members *not* to live according to the law in order to avoid the curse that it will bring.

There are several proposals of how to interpret Paul’s use of Deuteronomy 27:26. Some scholars, such as Franz Mussner, argue that Paul believes “the principle of doing the Torah is ineffective as far as salvation is concerned because nobody is capable of fulfilling the demands of the law.”¹³⁸ This interpretation implies that since “those who try to do so fail to keep the law completely, they are accursed.”¹³⁹ Though it is true that Paul claims “it is evident no one is made in a right relationship” through the law in verse 11, he does not explicitly say it is impossible. For this reason, it is probable that Paul’s statement has more to do with *in whom or in what* his readers are placing their trust in rather than whether or not they keep the law. The law in itself is not “contrary to the promise made to Abraham,” but it does become dangerous for those who “seek justification before God by the works of the law.”¹⁴⁰ The reason that Paul is able to claim that “it is evident no one is made in a right relationship with God” in verse 11 is because history confirms humans’ inability to remain in accordance with the law. As told by the

¹³⁶ Roetzel, *The Letters of Paul*, 101.

¹³⁷ New Interpreter’s Bible, “Galatians,” 258.

¹³⁸ Hans Dieter Betz, *Galatians: A Commentary on Paul’s Letter to the Churches in Galatia*. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), 146.

¹³⁹ Stanton, “Galatians,” 67.

¹⁴⁰ Betz, *Galatians*, 149.

accounts in the Torah, for example, the nation of Israel “historically has failed...and incurred the judgment of which Deuteronomy warns.”¹⁴¹ Because humanity, like the Israelites, continually fails to keep the law, the law in itself is not enough to reconcile them with God. Humanity is cursed. Paul reasons that because everyone is “under a curse” (3.10), they *deserve* to die the same shameful death as those who are cursed upon a tree. The exact sins for which humans deserve to die a death on the cross are not made explicit within these two texts that are under review. It is, however, clear from Paul’s choice to equate the curse of the law with the curse of the cross that he believes peoples’ inability to reconcile themselves by following the law separates them from God. Without the chance at reconciliation, they deserve to die the death which leads to permanent separation. By showing that no one is made in a right relationship with God and that everyone is cursed, Paul establishes the need for another medium besides the law through which humans could receive redemption. Thus, the crucifixion is significant for understanding salvation first and foremost because the law was not enough to bring about reconciliation.

Paul worked hard to show that humans cannot trust in the law to justify them because he must “reject any soteriological option that may make the death [of Jesus] superfluous.”¹⁴² If he does not prove that Jesus’ death was necessary, then it confirms what his opponents were arguing: humans only need the law to be justified. As discussed above, the social and religious connotations associated with crucifixion in both Jewish and Greco-Roman culture required Paul to provide an explanation for why God would offer salvation through a crucified Messiah. In order to find a logical explanation,

¹⁴¹ *New Interpreter’s Dictionary*, “Galatians,” 259.

¹⁴² Charles B.A. Cousar, *Theology of the Cross: The Death of Jesus in the Pauline Letters*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 114.

something from the traditional understanding of the Messiah had to bend—it was the law. Paul is using the cross, then, to confront the opposition responsible for teaching the Galatians that they needed to be circumcised to be saved. He is trying to prove that the law cannot justify people by elevating the role of Jesus’ scandalous death on the cross. Because Paul establishes that humans are not capable on their own to make their relationship right with God, either by wisdom as discussed in 1 Corinthians 1, or by the law in Galatians 3, he confirms humanity’s need to be rescued. We needed God to offer salvation, and God does through Jesus Christ. Thus, the second reason why the crucifixion itself is necessary for understanding redemption is that through Jesus’ death, God initiates the act of salvation because humans could not.

The remedy to our deserved punishment is offered in verse 13. The verb used in this sentence is “ἐξηγόρασεν,” which literally means “to lead out,” but it can also be interpreted to mean “to set free from.” The word for “us,” “ὑμᾶς,” is in the accusative case, which is used to signify a direct object; we, therefore, are the direct recipients of Jesus’ action. Paul is claiming that Jesus led us out and “set us free” from the curse pronounced by the law. The use of the preposition “ὑπὲρ” is also significant. Ronald Fung claims that while this word is sometimes translated as “for our sake,” “it need not mean anything more than ‘on our behalf.’”¹⁴³ However, the very phrase “on our behalf” is one of the most important points that Paul makes in this section because it indicates *why* the crucifixion is necessary. Jesus’ suffered on the cross on “our behalf,” which implies that Jesus suffered so that we do not have to suffer the consequences of our sin on a cross. Therefore, the third reason why the particular manner in which Jesus died is

¹⁴³ Fung, Ronald Y.K. *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Epistle to the Galatians*. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1988), 149.

significant is because through his death on the cross, Jesus removed the curse of the law from humanity. The cross powerfully symbolizes how Jesus has removed the curse which would otherwise have separated us from God and God's people.¹⁴⁴

Because Paul believes that Jesus' crucifixion has removed the curse of the law, the importance of "faith" is a strong theme within Galatians 3:1-14. Paul wants the Galatians to realize that it is through belief in the message of the cross, not through the law, that they receive salvation. Paul asks them, "Did the spirit choose to work out of the law or out of preaching faith?" he immediately responds, "Thus, you are foolish" (3.2-3). He is implying that the Galatians "have already received the Spirit of God entirely apart from any observances of the Jewish Law."¹⁴⁵ Paul desires for his listeners to conclude that they experienced God "by faith in the gospel message."¹⁴⁶

Based on the phrase "out of preaching faith" in verse five, Hans Dieter Betz, a scholar of Pauline literature, concludes that "the proclamation of the Christian faith alone is sufficient for God's grace and therefore sufficient for the Galatians' salvation."¹⁴⁷ Although Betz is correct to conclude that the law is not responsible for saving individuals, he is incorrect to claim that Paul is arguing that it was the moment when the Gospel was proclaimed to the Galatians that they received salvation. If the proclamation itself saved humans, then logically, everyone who heard the Gospel would be saved. Contrary to Betz, Ronald Fung identifies that it is "by reason of their believing response to the proclamation of Jesus Christ crucified" which endowed the Galatians with the

¹⁴⁴ Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy*, 285.

¹⁴⁵ *New Interpreter's Bible*. "Galatians," edited by Leander E. Keck. Vol. 11. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 251.

¹⁴⁶ Fung, *The New International Commentary*, 130.

¹⁴⁷ Betz, *Galatians*, 136.

Spirit.¹⁴⁸ According to Fung, it is the Galatians' response of *believing* the message that God chooses to save humanity through Jesus' crucifixion, which has the saving power. Fung's explanation agrees with Paul's writing in 1 Corinthians 1, verse 21, that "those believing" are those "being saved," and again in Galatians 3, verse 14, where Paul writes "we might receive the promise of the spirit by believing." Because Paul places an emphasis on the power of belief in both of these passages, Fung's interpretation of verses one through five is more accurate than Betz's. Paul is arguing that like Abraham (3.6), the Galatians will be "δικαιοσύνη:" "righteous" or "in a right relationship with God," because of their faith.

Paul's discussion of faith is significant because he believes that as a result of faith, all nations have been made free of the curse and are instead able to be blessed under the covenant through their belief in the Gospel. He commands his audience to "know that those believing, they are the sons of the Abraham" (3.7). This is a bold claim to make, for those who are "the sons of Abraham" would be under the protection and favor of the covenant that God made with Abraham. Paul needs to make such bold claims, however, because he is working towards a socially-inclusive Gospel; he wants to prove that both Jews *and* Gentiles are entitled to receive the Gospel message. When he quotes "all the nations would be blessed by you" from the Torah, he is implying that "Scripture...foretold by Abraham" that Gentiles would be justified and saved.

There is universality in this message of the cross. Charles Cousar writes that Christ's action on our behalf means that "the law has done its job, performed its condemning function at the cross."¹⁴⁹ Cousar means to express that Jesus' death was

¹⁴⁸ Fung, *The New International Commentary*, 132.

¹⁴⁹ Cousar, *A Theology of the Cross*, 115.

“once-and-for-all, which has universal dimensions.”¹⁵⁰ This universality in Paul’s argument is what makes the Gospel such good news; it is not offered only to the law keepers, only to the Jews, or only to the morally correct; it is offered to all. This is also the point which Paul concludes with in verse 14. The transition “so that” (ὥστε) expresses the purpose of Christ’s act of leading humanity out from the curse. The purpose is two-fold. First of all, this action was necessary so that “all nations” could become “a blessing in Jesus Christ.” Second, Christ’s action also made it possible for all “to receive the promise of the spirit by believing” (3.14). Therefore, this blessing in Jesus is “ultimately intended for the whole world,” and those who believe the message of the cross are the descendents of Abraham because their “identify is rooted in trusting God’s power.”¹⁵¹

Through this explanation, Paul attempts to give those who were familiar with the passage in Deuteronomy and with the shame involved in the Roman punishment of crucifixion a reason for *why* God would save the world through a crucified Messiah. He also wanted to use the scandalous nature of the cross to confront the Galatians’ incorrect belief that they could be reconciled if they tried to keep the law. If we understand the human condition and Jesus’ death to be consistent with what Paul presents in Galatians 3 and 1 Corinthians 1, then we can conclude that Jesus’ crucifixion was indeed necessary in order for humans to receive salvation. Prior to Jesus’ death, human beings were stuck in a state in which neither their own wisdom nor their moral character, neither their social standing nor their obedience to the law of the Torah could put them in a right relationship with God. Just as Deuteronomy mentions that men were killed and impaled for their sins, humanity was essentially “cursed” and deserved to die a cursed death for their sins. Jesus,

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 56.

¹⁵¹ *New Interpreter’s Bible*, “Galatians,” 256.

however, took the curse “on our behalf” (3.13) by dying the cursed death that we deserved to die for our permanent inability to maintain a right standing with God. For these reasons, the specific manner of death that Jesus experienced is significant for understanding salvation according to Paul.

VI (C) THEOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE EXEGESIS ON 1 CORINTHIANS AND GALATIANS

Together, 1 Corinthians 1:18-30 and Galatians 3:1-14 reveal that God is a loving and merciful God who seeks out those in need of rescue from sin and works in the world contrary to human social standards. The following discussion only addresses what Paul’s letters imply about God’s nature; however, for those who believe that the Bible should be determinative of what Christians believe, it reveals what Christians today should think about God.

From 1 Corinthians 1:18-30, we can conclude that God is “in no way bound by human categories or expectations,”¹⁵² and, therefore, is a God who tears down human boundaries. When Jesus was hung on a cross that was associated with people who had been condemned by society to suffer a death of shame and humiliation, “God...forever aligned [God's self] with the disenfranchised.”¹⁵³ On the cross, God identifies with the condemned members of society: those who would have been classified as the ungodly, even cursed by God. Leander Keck raises an important question, for he asks, “What sort of God would God be if God [only] identified with the godly, the pious, the religious?”¹⁵⁴ He would be the kind of God who would care more about legalism and piety than the dire reality of the human condition. Instead, “the radical otherness of God” is exposed in the

¹⁵² Cousar, *A Theology of the Cross*, 181.

¹⁵³ Fee, *The First Epistle*, 82.

¹⁵⁴ Keck, *Paul and His Letters*, 114.

Gospel message.¹⁵⁵ Paul's statement that "God takes pleasure in the foolishness of what is preached" and that the "world does not know the wisdom of God" (1 Cor. 1:21) indicates that God works in ways that are not often known or expected by humanity and that God desired to save to humanity.

Paul was using the scandalous nature of the cross to confront the issues that faced the churches to which he was writing: epistemology and lust for wisdom in Corinth, and the belief in Galatia that the law made humans right with God. Paul's ability to use the crucifixion to address epistemology in one letter and the problem of the law in the other shows his flexibility as a thinker and writer. A comprehensive summary of the God that is revealed in Paul's explanations of the message of the cross is provided by Leander Keck who writes that "for those who believe in it, the Christ-event strips away illusions about who God is and who they are."¹⁵⁶ I would add that the Christ-event also directly addresses the "mystery of God" that Paul refers to in 1 Corinthians 1:21. Jesus' death on the cross is a revelation of God's mystery to humanity because it takes away misconceptions about who God is and what God's hopes are for the world. Jesus himself is a reflection of God's nature.

Based on the arguments developed in 1 Corinthians 1:18-30 and Galatians 3:1-14, the particular form of death that Jesus' experienced, namely crucifixion, is significant for understanding salvation. Paul's writing indicates that due to the presence of sin, humans deserved to die a cursed death which leads to separation from others and from God. By saving the world through a shameful death on the cross, Jesus leads humanity away from the curse that they deserved. From this understanding, crucifixion itself was necessary to

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 115.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 122.

reconcile humanity's estrangement from God. Jesus' death provides insight into God's nature and God's desire to be in a relationship with people. It also shows the lengths that God was willing to go to and the suffering that Jesus was willing to experience in order to rescue humans from the cycle of sin and alienation.

VII. The Cross' Significance Today

Thus far, I have discussed the difficulties that Jews and Gentiles in antiquity would have experienced in accepting Jesus' crucifixion as salvific. People, however, still experience difficulties with the message of the cross today. Unlike those living in antiquity, we are separated from the Christ-event by approximately 2000 years of history. As a result, we are distanced not only from the event of Jesus' crucifixion, but also from the cultural implications associated with crucifixion that makes Jesus' death particularly poignant and meaningful. How, then, is the crucifixion and Paul's treatise to the Galatians and Corinthians significant today?

Through an analysis of the practice of crucifixion under the Roman Empire, it is possible to draw connections between the historical practice of crucifixion and Jesus' death. Both Greco-Roman and Jewish sources confirm that crucifixion was a common form of execution during the first century B.C.E and C.E. For example, there are accounts of "500 or also more being seized" and crucified each day under Titus (79-81 CE),¹⁵⁷ and up to 2,000 being crucified at one time under the Roman general Varus (46 B.C.E-9 C.E.). Based on these accounts, there is potential for the argument to arise that Jesus' death was not unique because he experienced such a common form of execution.

People who propagate this argument, however, fail to recognize that Jesus' crucifixion is given additional meaning precisely because it *was* so common. As

¹⁵⁷ Flavius Josephus, *The Jewish War*, 5.450-451.

discussed previously, Greco-Roman literary sources and archaeological evidence confirm that those who were crucified by Roman officials were generally people guilty of crimes such as treason or leading a rebellion. These individuals were publicly humiliated and condemned by society. Gordon Fee correctly identifies that the most important part of the Gospel is the mercy that God shows to these groups of criminals and/or slaves whom are despicable according to human standards.¹⁵⁸

While it is true that Jesus' death is common in the sense that crucifixion was practiced frequently, it is simultaneously unique because of whom it was that died on the cross. The argument that Jesus' death is insignificant because he experienced an execution that was common during the first century C.E. is incorrect. It is unique if we understand Jesus to be the Messiah. If we do understand this, then Jesus' death is unlike other crucifixions by the very nature that it is the Messiah who died a death reserved for the loathed and condemned members of society. In his letter to the Philippians, Paul quotes the Christ hymn which reads:

Who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross. [Philippians 2:6-8]

In this excerpt, Christ takes “the form of a slave.” By dieing the death of a slave on the cross, Jesus identifies with humanity, with suffering, and with the condemned. Thus, the common nature of crucifixion gives Jesus' death more meaning and insight into God's nature because in the Christ-event, God the Son endures suffering *for* humanity. In this suffering, Jesus is able to identify fully with the suffering of humanity and with our alienation from God.

¹⁵⁸ Fee, *The First Epistle*, 87.

However, Pamela Dickey Young of the Queen's University in Canada also presents an argument that contests the modern significance of Jesus' crucifixion. Young maintains that she can see no continued usefulness in understanding Jesus' death as the redemptive event for humanity in the world today. Her motivation for making this argument is rooted in her fear that the crucifixion of Jesus "seems to glorify suffering" when, in her opinion, suffering results from injustices within society and not divine will.¹⁵⁹ Young fears that Christians, and women in particular, will see Jesus' death as an example that must be followed in order to remain faithful to God.¹⁶⁰ She argues that if we identify Jesus' death as the sole act of salvation for humanity, then it will "be lauded both as exemplary and as willed by God."¹⁶¹ It is for these reasons that Young suggests that Christians should not view the crucifixion as atoning or as an example to follow, but rather as a witness to the presence of sin in the world. We are to believe that God did not offer salvation at one single moment in history during the crucifixion, but that God offers salvation each day.¹⁶²

Determining whether or not Jesus' death motivates women or other individuals to stay in situations in which they experience suffering is beyond the scope of this paper. Young's work cannot be ignored because she does offer some valuable points. She is correct to claim that Jesus' life and actions should serve as models for moral and loving behavior and to assert that we live in a period in which Jesus' death is "far removed from most of the cultural symbol systems... [that] make sense of our lives."¹⁶³ The argument,

¹⁵⁹ Pamela Dickey Young, *Beyond Moral Influence to an Atoning Life*, in *Theology Today*, 52.03 (ATLA Serials 2006), 344.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 347.

¹⁶² Ibid., 351.

¹⁶³ Ibid., 345.

however, that Jesus' death was not salvific and that the cross has no further relevance to people today must be contested in our discussion of Pauline theology. As the title of her article suggests, Young is working to move beyond the atonement theory of "moral influence"¹⁶⁴ to a theory that suggests Jesus' *life* itself was atoning. In her attempt to explain Christianity in a way that does not venerate suffering, Young actually undermines the core message of Paul's Gospel and of Christianity: God brings salvation through Jesus' death on the cross. She misinterprets the Gospel by encouraging her readers to believe that the crucifixion is completely irrelevant to our salvation.¹⁶⁵ Young fails to take sin seriously, and she fails to move beyond a "moral influence" Christology despite her claim otherwise. For these reasons, her theology opposes Paul's writings and the argument of this thesis: that the crucifixion is necessary for salvation.

Just as certain Jews and Gentiles in ancient Palestine had difficulty in understanding the meaning of the crucifixion because of their experiences of God and the world, so too does Young struggle to embrace the message of the crucifixion because of her perspective. Young and other theologians who share her opinion face their own stumbling block which prevents them from understanding Jesus' death as Paul presents it in his letters to the Galatians and Corinthians. For the Jews, the stumbling block was that glorification of a crucified Messiah was blasphemy because it would mean honoring one whom God had condemned. For Young, the stumbling block is that glorification of a crucified Messiah threatens to exalt suffering as something that is willed by God and should be imitated.¹⁶⁶ Paul was explaining the crucifixion from the context of his

¹⁶⁴ The "moral influence" theory of atonement is most often credited to Peter Abelard; it holds that Jesus' death serves as a moral example for the actions and intentions of Christians.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 350.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 347.

experiences and cultural understanding; so, too, are contemporary theologians like Young. A correct interpretation, however, of Paul's explanation of the crucifixion shows why Jesus' death on the cross was indeed required for atonement.

The first weakness in Young's attempt to prove that the cross is insignificant is her failure to offer an atonement theory that moves beyond moral influence. This is incongruous with what she claims that she will do in her essay. Her understanding of atonement is influenced by her perception of the human condition. Whereas Paul views the human situation to be bound by sin, death, and the law,¹⁶⁷ Young identifies it as "a lack of integrity, a lack of wholeness in relation."¹⁶⁸ The separation between humanity and God is more serious according to Paul than in Young's assessment; it is not just that humans lack wholeness, but that they are literally slaves to their sin.

Based on her understanding of God's response to the human condition, Young encourages her readers to see the grace that is present in the "accounts of Jesus' encounters with those he met throughout his ministry."¹⁶⁹ She wants her audience to accept Jesus as a model of social justice and morality. This understanding has been termed as "moral influence" in other atonement theories.¹⁷⁰ Ultimately, Young wants us to move past this understanding because she does not believe that we can reconcile ourselves on our own. She does not, however, succeed in moving past the "moral influence" theory of atonement because she emphasizes that Jesus' life was only valuable as a model for how to engage with others and the community. Young fails to offer an alternative understanding of salvation that shows how both God and humanity must

¹⁶⁷ Keck, *Paul and His Letters*, 116.

¹⁶⁸ Young, "Beyond the Moral," 346.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 350.

¹⁷⁰ The most well-known advocate of the moral influence theory to atonement is the philosopher and theologian, Peter Abelard (1079-1142).

engage in salvation. She, in fact, is guilty of a similar fault that she censures in others, for she criticizes Christians for only focusing on the death of Jesus while disregarding the lessons taught by his life.¹⁷¹ She does the exact opposite. Young emphasizes Jesus' life alone while disregarding the meaning behind the crucifixion.¹⁷² Neither interpretation is complete; both Jesus' life and death are important for understanding God's efforts to bring salvation to humanity.

Young wants her audience to believe that the crucifixion is no longer relevant because God offers salvation to us each new day rather than at one solitary moment in history. If we use Paul's writings to understand the redemptive value of Jesus' death, then it is not possible to dismiss the crucifixion completely as Young attempts to do. As we see from Paul's letter to the Galatians, God had to act through Christ's crucifixion and humiliation in order for the curse of sin and suffering to be removed. Jesus took the curse "on our behalf" (Gal. 3.13) because *we were incapable* of reconciling ourselves with God. The fact that Jesus "led us out of the curse" (Gal. 3.13) implies that we as humans deserved the curse of being separated from God and from community because of our sin. Since we deserved the curse, it was necessary for someone to take our place. Young, however, does not recognize the seriousness of the chasm which separated God from humanity or how this chasm could only be bridged by something as radical as the crucifixion of Jesus. For Paul, God has to act on our behalf; for Young, God is still acting, but only as an example of defiance against evil through Jesus. Both Young and Paul acknowledge that God acts, but Young fails to see that the event of crucifixion was first necessary before the prospect of living in a right relationship was even possible.

¹⁷¹ Young, "Beyond the Moral," 352.

¹⁷² Ibid., 351.

In the end, Young claims that Jesus' death only serves as an example to Christians of the need to resist evil and to refuse "to compromise for anything that is less than ultimately important."¹⁷³ In this way, Young's atonement theory is still similar to the moral influence theory. Both Young and the traditional understanding of "moral influence" atonement hold that Jesus' death serves as a moral example for the actions and intentions of Christians. Because she does not provide a satisfactory explanation of atonement in which she acknowledges the need for God to take the broken relationship into himself, Young fails to do what the very title of her article claims it will do—move beyond Jesus' moral influence.

The second weakness of Young's argument is her failure to truly take sin seriously and thus to realize the need for God to take drastic measures to rescue humanity from this sin. This is ironic considering that she claims to take it very seriously by acknowledging the presence of evil in the world. Young's claim that humans have the tendency to break relationships with one another or with God fails to acknowledge the magnitude of the alienation between God and humans. The systematic annihilation of entire groups of people that has occurred throughout history is not just an example of a broken relationship; it testifies to the great capacity that humans have to do evil. Therefore, Paul's assessment of humanity is more realistic, for he identifies our inability to justify ourselves by obeying the law (Gal. 3.11) or through human wisdom (1 Cor. 1.21). Young herself even acknowledges that what "happened to Jesus [is] the product of human evil not divine will."¹⁷⁴ She, however, fails to draw the connection that it is not just that our relationship with God is strained. The crucifixion illustrates the *extreme* level

¹⁷³ Ibid., 352.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 353.

of brokenness and estrangement that humans exist in; we have such a capacity for evil that we even ventured so far as to kill the Messiah.

If she truly understands human's potential for evil, then how is it possible for her to say that the crucifixion is not all relevant to Christians today? Jesus' death is indeed the "embodiment of the suffering of God, a resistance to evil, and solidarity with the suffering of humanity,"¹⁷⁵ as Young claims, but if that is all it is, then what good was it? Humans would still be under a curse without justification before God unless God made some attempt to rescue us from that curse. Paul provides a solution to this conundrum, for he believes that the crucifixion effects redemption. In his death, Christ "leads us out" (Gal. 3.13) and removes the curse from us. Only when we understand Jesus' life and death as God's revelation of God's self and of God's efforts to save humanity does it have any meaning.

A final weakness of Young's is her claim that in Jesus' death God does not properly identify with the suffering of people throughout history. She believes that in order for this to happen, God must suffer in "God's very self."¹⁷⁶ She criticizes the Christ-event saying, "It is not all at all clear why God must suffer in humanity."¹⁷⁷ She fails to see that because Jesus—God the Son—dies what Paul acknowledges as a scandalous death on the cross, God is able to identify with those whom society condemns. If she had taken the historical implications of crucifixion into proper consideration, she would have been more equipped to see the importance of both Jesus' human and divine nature. Through the crucifixion, Jesus identifies fully with the suffering of humanity and with our alienation from God.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 353.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 348.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

Even though Jesus' death occurred almost 2000 years ago, it is still relevant today. When we understand the historical context in which Jesus was crucified, we gain an understanding of the horrific and humiliating practice that crucifixion was. From this understanding we learn that in his death on the cross, Jesus identifies not only with human suffering but also with those whom society condemns. This insight into God's character is still significant today. Moreover, this discussion of Young's essay shows that it is not enough for those of us living in the twenty-first century to learn from Jesus' teachings and to emulate them. It is not enough simply to say that God offers salvation each day without acknowledging the reality of what Jesus experienced. Jesus' death on the cross and the continued presence of violence, oppression, and suffering in the world reveal how truly sinful humans can be. As Paul's writing indicates, we are not capable of reconciling ourselves with God on our own. If we accept Paul's teachings, then it becomes clear that the crucifixion was necessary in order for the curse of sin and suffering to be removed from humanity. The Christ-event, therefore, affects redemption by making it possible.

The cross is still significant today because the world is still in need of the God that is made manifest in Jesus. It is still in need of an unpredictable God that is not constrained by human boundaries and chooses to identify with those whom society condemns. It is still in need of a God that initiates salvation through the death of the Messiah so that we might live in a right relationship with God. We cannot disregard the cross as Paul explains it, for it is precisely this message that offers the hope of transformation and the new life which the world still requires today.

VIII. Conclusion

The purpose of this study has been to perform a historically-informed exegesis of crucifixion in Paul's letters in order to determine the contemporary theological implications of Jesus' crucifixion. A historical analysis of 1 Corinthians and Galatians 3 reveals that the sociological connotations of crucifixion in the ancient world caused Paul to explain Jesus' death in a way that would address these perspectives held by earlier traditions. As a result, Paul interpreted the meaning of Jesus' death from his own religious and cultural perception that crucifixion represented the curse of God upon legal transgressors. Paul was familiar with the culture of the Roman Empire as well as the Jewish literature that led certain Jews to fear that belief in a crucified Messiah would be blasphemous. Because his writings provide insight into how Jesus' crucifixion might have been perceived in the 1st century C.E. and how atonement can be interpreted in this context, Paul is a worthy topic of theological study.

Christians today often focus more on the brutal and violent aspects of crucifixion rather than the sociological implications of this form of execution. It is true that Jesus experienced an execution that was methodologically painful and horrific. An element, however, of the theological meaning of Jesus' crucifixion is lost when we focus on the terror of crucifixion and overlook its historicity. The Gospel message is historically embedded because the use of crucifixion as a capital punishment is unique to the historical context in which Jesus lived. The religious and sociological implications of crucifixion as derived from Jewish and Greco-Roman literature, as well as from archaeology, reveals that crucifixion was a scandalous method of execution. When we interpret Jesus' death in light of these sources, it becomes clear that the particular form of

death which Jesus experienced is significant for understanding salvation according to Paul's perception of crucifixion and the human predicament. Therefore, it is necessary to understand the historical use of crucifixion in order to understand the true meaning of Jesus' death.

In regards to the theological implications of this study, Christians receive insight into God's nature through the Christ-event. Jesus' death has the power not only to offer humanity salvation, but also to break down people's false illusions of who God is; it breaks down our misconception that we can control or predict God. What is even more important, however, is that Paul's writing in Galatians and Corinthians confirms humanity's great need for God to offer salvation. The crucifixion is not, as Pamela Young and some contemporary theologians suggest, obsolete. Regarding it simply as an example of humans' capacity for evil or as a moral model for Christians to follow is to miss out on the deep theological implications of the Christ-event. If we hold the Bible to be determinative of what Christians are supposed to think, then it is not possible to conclude from Paul's writing that the crucifixion was unnecessary for salvation.

When scholars properly consider the historicity of the crucifixion, Jesus' death is given more theological meaning that would otherwise have been overlooked. Through Christ's crucifixion, Jesus showed that he was willing to endure a brutal and humiliating execution on our behalf in order to take the curse of death and separation which humans deserve. While we will never fully understand the mystery of God, Jesus' life and death reveal at least that God identifies with those whom society condemns and that God initiates reconciliation with us. The world is still in need of this God.

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