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Gary Habermas
Liberty University

Benjamin C. F. Shaw
Liberty University

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Crucifixion in the Ancient World: A Historical Analysis

Abstract

Cook, John Granger. *Crucifixion in the Mediterranean World*. 2nd ed. Vol. 327. Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen Zum Neuen Testament. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2019. Pp 549 pp. 79,00 €.

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Cover Page Footnote

Gary Habermas, Distinguished Research Professor of Apologetics at the John W. Rawlings School of Divinity. Benjamin C. F. Shaw, Ph.D. in Theology, Apologetics, and Church History

Introduction

In 1977 Martin Hengel wrote his incredible work *Crucifixion* which has become a classic work on the subject in just under 100 pages.¹ Hengel gave the honor of revising this small book to John Granger Cook, who quickly realized that “it would be advisable to write my own monograph” (vii).² This is understandable given the depth at which Cook plunges into the topic and the breadth of his research. While Hengel’s work will remain the concise classic, it was Hengel’s hope that Cook’s book will be “valid for the next 100 years” (xxxix).³ Undoubtedly this is a great scholarly weight to have upon one’s shoulders!

Cook’s book originally appeared in 2014 and in the midst of several other books on crucifixion, which were all published in the *WUNT* series.⁴ Five years later, a second edition was published in which Cook addresses various reviewers and includes an *addendum* (xvii). Given that there have been a number of reviews of Cook’s first edition, we will only give a very brief summary of the work itself in order to spend more time engaging with his material.

Summary

The second edition begins with a helpful preface that responds to various reviews of the first edition. The overwhelming majority, however, focuses on a response to the “most critical” review by Gunnar Samuelsson (xvii). Responses to other reviewers are also helpful as they address various detailed points and nuances.

The book starts by introducing a linguistic analysis of crucifixion Greek and Latin terminology. Cook finds that definitions of crucifixion as “execution by suspension” are acceptable “as long as one excludes impalement of hanging” (2, 161). He concludes that *stauros* was not used to describe an explicit impalement

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

² References to Cook’s work will be made in the body of the text throughout.

³ This is Cook’s translation of an email from Hengel.

⁴ David W. Chapman, *Ancient Jewish and Christian Perceptions of Crucifixion*, WUNT II/244 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008); Gunnar Samuelsson, *Crucifixion in Antiquity*, 2nd ed., WUNT II/310 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013); David W. Chapman and Eckhard J. Schnabel, *The Trial and Crucifixion of Jesus*, WUNT 344 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015). Felicity Harley has recently provided a very helpful summary and analysis of these books (including Cook’s) as well as their relationship to one another. Felicity Harley, “Crucifixion in Roman Antiquity: The State of the Field,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 27, no. 2 (June 26, 2019): 303–23.

or hanging and that for Roman executions, the “Greek and Latin words for crucifixion are clear enough” (50).

Chapter one is a thorough examination of crucifixion in Latin texts. The chapter breaks down the usage into three parts: usage during the Republic (51-92), Caesar to Constantine (92-140), and those writing after Constantine (140-158). After an extensive analysis of the different sources, Cook concludes that these texts provide good evidence of Roman crucifixion by providing informative details about the crucifixion practices and their use of the technical references *crux* and *patibulum* in doing so (158).

Chapter two is closely related and examines Roman crucifixions chronologically. Here again, Cook offers a distinction between the practice during the Republic (161-180) and the Imperium (180-214). Throughout this chapter, detailing crucifixions was only tangentially important to the majority of Roman writers. Indeed, Cook notes that there are only twenty names of crucified individuals that have survived in existing sources despite the fact that there were, conservatively estimated, 30,000 victims (159-160, 216).

The third chapter then turns to an examination of crucifixion in Greek texts. As with the Latin evidence, this section distinguishes between comments made during the Republic (218-233) and Imperium (233-260). Further nuances are also made regarding crucifixion comments found in romance novels (260-268), rhetors (268-271), philosophers (271-274), pagan critics of Christianity (274-281), astrologers (282-289), dream interpreters (289-293), physicians (293-294), and various other traditions found in later texts (294-309). Cook reminds readers again that the Greek language used for crucifixion does *not* indicate impalement or hanging (218, 310; cf. 50).

Hebrew and Aramaic crucifixion texts are examined in the fourth chapter. The similarities and differences between Jewish and Roman conceptions and practices are noted throughout the chapter. Although Cook notes that some of the language in this chapter *could* be translated “impale,” there are no instances where it is explicitly clear that this is the case (311, 356-357).

With the linguistic groundwork cleared and the varieties of crucifixion practices noted, chapter five examines the relationship between crucifixion and its legal application. Crucifixion was the basic *servile supplicium* (slave punishment) and considered the *summum supplicium* (extreme penalty). Prior to crucifixion, a variety of punishments could occur depending upon one’s legal status (362-370). For example, according to the *lex Peuteolana*, these could include carrying one’s *patibulum* to the crucifixion site (374), being flogged or beaten (375-379), the possible use of fire (380-382), and the threat of being dragged through town (383-385) or being denied burial (385-387). Cook also provides a helpful description of the historical development of the legal use of Roman crucifixion until its

abolition, noting that the last demonstrable case of an approved crucifixion occurs in 335 (404, 416).

The sixth chapter, and perhaps of most interest to NT scholars, is an assessment of Roman crucifixion and the New Testament accounts. Cook reminds the reader of the shame associated with such a death (418-423) and offers a helpful comparison of Jesus' crucifixion with other accounts of Roman crucifixion (423-430). As will be noted below, it is curious that in this section there is a discussion on the medical causes of death from crucifixion (430-435), but no discussion on the medical causes for Jesus' death. Cook notes that the Gospel narratives of Jesus' crucifixion are themselves a form of theology (417) and offers an examination of Mark in this vein (435-448).

Cook closes this work by offering a robust but concise summary of his findings throughout the work (450-452). As noted above, the second edition includes further textual material (453-463) and archeological analysis (463-477).

Unpacking the Details of Cook's Treatment

As can be observed from the foregoing chapter summaries, Cook's volume is indeed an encyclopedia of information regarding the subject of crucifixion as it was practiced in the ancient Mediterranean world. The genius of this text is its minute particulars, the unpacking of which could supply virtually everything that could be expected of this general topic. But since it may be the case that these sorts of specifics are seldom either encountered or digested elsewhere, one asset of this review article is in emphasizing these aspects in order to further their use in other publications. A few additional conclusions also will be raised at the end.

One caution, however, is that much of the study is somewhat tangential to the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, with the exception of Chapter Six on "Roman Crucifixion and the New Testament," as well as many dozens of briefer comparisons throughout this text. That being said, a large portion of the study provides much background information that remains highly relevant for studies regarding Jesus' crucifixion. In Chapter Six and elsewhere, the more specifically Roman treatment is chiefly discussed throughout, covering as it does more than five centuries of ancient civilization, which Cook circumscribes as dating from the Second Punic War in the late third century B.C. until Constantine in the early fourth century AD (2, 452). It is probably by far the best-known form of crucifixion in the ancient world as well, not to mention being that which was employed in the life of the historical Jesus and the environment thereabouts.

Crucifixion Terminology

To begin with some crucifixion vocabulary, Cook points out that “to crucify” is the best translation of the relevant verbs (37, 50). The words “cross” or “pole” are the preferred translation of the nouns (50). Cook also explains that “*Patibulum* usually does mean ‘crossbeam’” (xxi, 15-34, 37, 96-100, 453). It is generally thought to be the portion that was often or usually carried by the victim to the final place of execution and upon which the sufferer was stretched out (8, 16, 21, 24, 27-34, 423). It is possible, however, that this term also could be a reference to the entire cross (6, 29, 97, 102). Further confirmation of these and similar conclusions are likewise reiterated (450-451). The vertical beam or the entire cross with two parts is referred to as the *crux* or *stipes* (16, 23, 34-37).

Occasionally a *sedila* or *sedile* (a seat) could also be provided for the procedure (xxi, 7, 36, 427) and could serve more than one purpose. The posting of a *titulus* or placard that included additional information was also possible, as depicted in the Gospels pertaining to Jesus (427).⁵

Crucifixion Practice

In his acclaimed and scholarly primer on the subject, German New Testament scholar Martin Hengel remarks that the topic of crucifixion was frequently either not discussed in the ancient world, or else often done very meagerly due to the fact that many ancients considered it to be offensive.⁶ Seneca the Younger was among the few Romans who described crucifixion agony in detail.⁷ Several relevant citations and details here are contained in both Hengel (*Crucifixion*, 27, 30, 35, 37, 59) and Cook (94-102, especially 102 and 419).

As implied, crucifixion involved a highly shameful form of death (418). In addition to the medical, political, and other factors, victims were often crucified naked, though this does not necessarily mean total nudity, as coverings of one sort or another were often employed (23-24, 192-193, 427, xxvii-xxviii). Neither were women exempt, as they were also killed in this manner (194, 203, 216, 428), as

⁵ Mk. 15:26; Mt. 27:37; Lk. 23:38; Jn. 19:19-22.

⁶ Hengel, *Crucifixion*, 25, 28, 38. On the theological side, Hengel’s companion volume is *The Atonement: The Origins of the Doctrine in the New Testament*, trans. by John Bowden (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981).

⁷ Such as Seneca, *Dialogue* 3.2.2; 6.20.3 for examples.

were children (194). Moreover, crucifixion victims often remained alive for one or more days, obviously extending the pain (111-112, 356, 434, 430 footnote 71; seven days in a legend, 198).

The Romans, among others, had many options as to how to suspend crucifixion victims and sometimes took full advantage of the situations, often being quite grotesque⁸ in the process (50, 96, 418, 427, especially note 52). The shapes of the crosses or other objects could vary widely (36-40, 49-50, 96), with such possibilities involving both Tau (“T” shaped) as well as the more traditional “t” shaped crosses with crossbeams. The latter were often compared to the masts of ships, which had at least one crossbeam (xxi, 5-7, 23, 185). Roman crucifixion was more commonly reserved for escaped slaves, enemies, and perpetrators of often-violent crimes (99, 455-460).

The use of scourging was a more-or-less normal precursor to crucifixion (96, 197, 448, cf. the case on 430 and also 40, but compare 468). Nails or other means of affixing the victim (such as ropes or chains) could be utilized (425, particularly footnote 45, which documents the usages of nails and ropes, with nails being far more common). Nails were the normal means chiefly utilized in Roman crucifixion (451; Hengel, *Crucifixion*, 32). These attachment practices also could be combined (190, 425-426; cf. case on 430-431).⁹

Cook explains that he found no explicit Roman references to suspending victims on a wall or board (xxv), hanging was not used by Romans, and there was an “apparent rarity of impalement in the Roman republic” (xxii; also 3, 12, 451). In the latter cases, the victims were lifted up on various structures and had poles run all the way through their bodies, resulting in very quick deaths (such as figures 17-19, 490-492). Cook takes great pains throughout to distinguish between crucifixion and impalement, in that the two methods of death were quite separate and distinct on many levels (3, 8-13, 49, 97-99, 102, 450-451; in fiction, 260-261). However, the Greeks were more prone to nail persons to boards and also departed from various other Roman crucifixion practices (especially 4-11; 452).

Various death blows of more than one type to either hasten death or to ensure its reality are likewise mentioned in the literature. Hengel mentions a

⁸ Hengel states that “crucifixion was a punishment in which the caprice and sadism of the executioners were given full rein” (Hengel, *Crucifixion*, 25).

⁹ For further references, see the use of ropes (22, 263, footnote 189, 430, note 70) as well as nails (7-8, 10, 34, 95, 98, 107, 189, 194, 195, 197, 243, 293, 426, 430, 454).

couple of cases.¹⁰ *Crurifragium* or the breaking of ankles normally to hasten the process of final death is mentioned a few times in the literature (148, 429, cf. the case on 430; cf. Jn. 19:31-33), as well as being at least a strong possibility in the Roman Empire.¹¹

Not to be confused with impalement (the alternate death sentence where the living body was pierced throughout, resulting in a very quick death), another species of post-death blow was to strike or pierce the bodies of victims *after* their crucifixions were concluded in order to make sure that they were actually deceased, as death assurance. It is espoused in the report of Roman author Quintilian that after the crucifixion crosses were cut down, the executioner allowed the burial of those bodies that had been struck or pierced.¹²

¹⁰ Hengel, *Crucifixion*, 70-71.

¹¹ S.J. Harrison argues for the likelihood of a number of *crurifragium* examples in the Roman world (“Cicero and ‘Crurifragium’” *The Classical Quarterly*, New Series, Vol. 33, [1983], 453-455, particularly the last two pages). In the case of the buried bones of crucifixion victim Jehohanan, opinions have been given variously among specialist observers. Nicu Haas favored *crurifragium* (“Anthropological Observations on the Skeletal Remain from Giv’at ha-Mivtar,” *Israel Exploration Journal*, Vol. 20 [1970], 57), as did Vilhelm Moller-Christensen, “Skeletal Remains from Giv’at ha-Mivtar,” *Israel Exploration Journal*, Vol. 26 [1976], 35-38. Similarly, Frederick T. Zugibe, judged that there was “no question” of *crurifragium* in this case (*The Cross and the Shroud: A Medical Examiner Investigates the Crucifixion* [Cresskill, N.J.: McDonagh, 1981], 92-94). On the other hand, studies by equally-skilled experts Joseph Zias and Eliezer Sekeles (“The Crucified Man from Giv’at ha-Mivtar: A Reappraisal,” *Israel Exploration Journal*, Vol. 35 [1985], 24) and later by Zias and James H. Charlesworth (“Crucifixion: Archaeology, Jesus, and the Dead Sea Scrolls,” in Charlesworth, *Jesus and the Dead Sea Scrolls*, The Anchor Bible Reference Library [N.Y.: Doubleday, 1992], 280) responded that the results of Haas’ study were “inconclusive” regarding *crurifragium* though it appears that the authors doubted that this process occurred. Bioarchaeologist Kristina Killgrove apparently also agreed that the results of *crurifragium* in Jehohanan’s case were inconclusive, though she noted in a response of Nov. 11, 2011 that there may be at least some indication of “2 possible males from Mendes subject to *crurifragium*” along with another nail hole possibly being evident in one of them (Blog: “Line on the Left, One Cross Each: Bioarchaeology of Crucifixion,” Nov. 4, 2011). Cook thinks that *crurifragium* in this latter case cannot be demonstrated for sure and disagrees on the presence of a nail wound here (472-473). Intriguingly, John Dominic Crossan considers *crurifragium* to be a historical practice in *Who Killed Jesus? Exposing the Roots of Anti-Semitism in the Gospel Story of the Death of Jesus* (N.Y.: Harper Collins [Harper San Francisco], especially 135). For a third century example of *crurifragium*, cf. also the Acts of Andrew, 51:1, 54.4 (as cited by Crossan here).

¹² Quintilian, *Declamationes maiores* 6:9. We will return to this subject below with regard to Jesus’ crucifixion.

With the wealth of crucifixion cases and descriptions in the ancient world, it might be thought that there would be a number of historical examples where the victims cheated death in some way, escaping from their cross. Or possibly the executioner missed something crucial. But there are apparently no known historical cases where this occurred, where someone “cheated” the process. Josephus narrates the story of finding three friends who had been crucified by the Romans, and he secured their releases. But two of the three men died anyway, even after being given the best medical care available!¹³ Since these three men were intentionally taken down and treated medically, specifically in order to spare their lives, it might even be argued that this increases the *unlikelihood* of surviving the events of crucifixion!

All told, it hardly takes much imagination to realize why crucifixion was referred to as the most miserable way to die (102, 199, 418-419). Add to everything else that though Josephus provides evidence for the burial even of felons and crucifixion victims, particularly by the Jews,¹⁴ as Cook notes (239, 461-462), this was not always the case, especially when done elsewhere and by others (119, 429-30, particularly 429, footnote 69 where sources are helpfully listed for each possibility).¹⁵

Jesus’ Crucifixion: Can a Cause of Death be at least Approximated?

Among Greco-Roman texts, the New Testament provides the “longest surviving narrative of anyone crucified by the Romans in antiquity” (216). Further, Gospel details “are the most extensive” from this time period (452). Very significantly, Cook notes that “Jesus’ death appears already in the earliest documents” of the New Testament, and he mentions the existence of a few “traditions” that may possibly be “pre-Pauline” (417). This is not the place to begin unpacking the volumes of material that have been written in recent decades on these early creedal expressions that even skeptical specialists date from very shortly after the crucifixion itself. But suffice it to say that it was specifically the very earliest apostolic message of the deity, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ that occupied the Gospel content preserved at the very center of this message. The bulk of the content in these proclamations concerned this Gospel report and

¹³ Josephus, *The Life of Flavius Josephus*, 25, Whiston trans.; Cook, 434; cf. the fictional stories, 261-262, 421, 429-430 including footnote 70.

¹⁴ Josephus, *The Jewish War*, 4:310-317.

¹⁵ Below this discussion of burial in a Jewish context will be applied to Jesus’ situation.

existed in the earliest Christian teaching. This material, including Jesus' crucifixion, is thereby placed on firm grounds, as widely agreed by virtually all critical scholars across the scholarly spectrum.¹⁶

Cook briefly discusses a number of possible causes of death by crucifixion (430-435, as well as providing other relevant comments throughout). He begins with a medical journal article¹⁷ that surveys numerous possible death causes. The authors, Matthew Maslen and Piers Mitchell, conclude that there is "insufficient evidence to safely state exactly how people did die from crucifixion in Roman times."¹⁸

Somewhat puzzlingly, Cook then states immediately after this that, "Two modern punishments are worth mentioning." But these cases apparently dated from the 1860s, and the second one is not a crucifixion case at all but the *haritsuke* brand of impalement (430-431). But as remarked above, Cook repels attempts to connect impalement with crucifixion and even seems to state later that at least this second case was "unhelpful" anyway (448-449). The entire scenario is somewhat confusing.

In the footnote to the first example, Cook mentions another crucifixion case in China from 1912, but aside from this, the purpose is not easy to discern. It seems that one point may be to question asphyxiation as the cause of death in these two examples, as Cook states (431), yet in both crucifixion cases from China, the victims were tied and/or chained apparently so as to keep their bodies in place without sagging. This was at least explicitly stated to be the reason in the 1912 crucifixion case. But as is well-known, such bodily supports would most

¹⁶ Though older, some of the most recognized and highly touted of these volumes include the following: Oscar Cullmann, *The Earliest Christian Confessions*, ed. Gary Habermas and Benjamin Charles Shaw, trans. J. K. S. Reid, Reprint (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2018 [1949, published in 1943 in both French—*Les Premières Confessions de Foi Chrétiennes*--and German--*Die ersten christlicher Glaubensbekenntnisse*]), 13, 16, 49-50, 53, 57-58; C.H. Dodd, *The Apostolic Preaching and its Developments* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1936; reprint, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1980), especially 16-31, also 11, 33-34; Vernon H. Neufeld, *The Earliest Christian Confessions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1963), 8-17, 47-48, 51, 58, 140-144. For more recent treatments essentially in agreement with the earlier research, see James D.G. Dunn, *Jesus Remembered*, Vol. 1 of *Christianity in the Making* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 173, 184-186, 828-832, 836, 854--879, 882; Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony*, Second ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2017), particularly Chapters 11-13.

¹⁷ Maslen and Mitchell, "Medical Theories on the Cause of Death in Crucifixion," *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine*, Vol. 99 (2006), 185-188.

¹⁸ Maslen and Mitchell, "Medical Theories," 188.

likely severely impede the process of asphyxiation anyway, where slumping into a lower position is often thought to be a chief cause of breathing troubles. This process thereby raises several questions regarding the age of the cases, the seeming conditions that would seem to prohibit asphyxiation in these instances, plus the point of inserting the latter *haritsuke* case that was apparently judged to be unfruitful anyway.

After these cases, Cook describes a punishment used during World War II¹⁹ where prisoners were “suspended by attaching their wrists to bars” above their heads for an hour, or sometimes even longer until they died. Death by these methods usually took an average of three to six hours. Respiratory problems were often reported (433-434). Utilizing university volunteers instead of prisoners, German radiologist Hermann Mödder actually experimented with willing students, who were hung from crosses or suspended from overhead structures while being monitored carefully, while still losing consciousness in a maximum of just twelve minutes.²⁰

To the contrary, medical examiner Frederick Zugibe also performed “crucifixion experiments” on volunteers apart from physical injury such as nails, and these subjects did not mention asphyxiation.²¹ However, Cook agrees with the study by Maslen and Mitchell that Zugibe’s research is open to too many criticisms, such as the victims not actually being crucified, with only a comparatively brief time on the cross, a lack of evidence favoring his own position, without prior whipping, carrying at least a portion of a heavy cross, the resulting dehydration, heat, excessive anxiety, and especially the lack of nails. Hence, Zugibe’s experiments were judged to be too inauthentic (434-435).²² As already noted, Maslen and Mitchell concluded that there was not enough evidence to know exactly what caused death from crucifixion in Roman times. Cook agreed that it was “too tenuous to formulate reliable conclusions” (448), perhaps at least in part due to the freedom exercised by the executioners, as emphasized earlier.

¹⁹ It is very difficult to know whether or not these World War II situations were meant by Cook to be the second punishment mentioned earlier on page 430.

²⁰ Hermann Mödder, “Die Todesursache bei der Kreuzigung,” *Stimmen der Zeit*, Vol. 144 (1948), 50-59. For a popular description of Mödder and a suspended volunteer, see Robert K. Wilcox, *Shroud* (N.Y.: Macmillan, 1977), 23-25, 72, 161, with the photograph on page 25.

²¹ Such as Zugibe, *The Cross and the Shroud*, 1981), 89-90. However, Zugibe did note that varying positions and fixations on the cross could well account for varying results (42-43, 67-71, 94-95, 114-115).

²² See Maslen and Mitchell, “Medical Theories,” 187.

Three post-death considerations must be pointed out here as well. First, the Roman writer Quintilian's comment was mentioned above that, after the process, the bodies of crucifixion victims that were struck/pieced could then be allowed to be buried. Cook explains that Quintilian's Latin term *percussus* here regarding execution is usually connected with a final blow or piercing from a sword, axe, or spear. In this sense, "The word's usage implies that a weapon was employed" (111, footnote 290).

Cook thought that Quintilian's reference²³ might serve as possible confirmation of John's account of Jesus' post-death chest wound (19:33-35). It is noteworthy that Origin may have had Quintilian's statement in mind here as well, due to his similar language in speaking of piercing being the "Roman's custom for those who are crucified" (111-112). Echoing more recent views, when treating John 19:34, Raymond E. Brown also cites Quintilian regarding the Roman practice of piercing bodies in order to ensure death by crucifixion.²⁴ Likewise referring to the tradition of Jesus' death by crucifixion as being "firm enough" James D.G. Dunn treats seriously both the breaking of the legs of crucifixion victims as well as Jesus' "spear thrust" to ensure his death, due to the ancient attestation.²⁵ It is significant that in both Quintilian and the Gospel account, this was a post-death blow for the sake of assurance.

A second item is the major assessment made famous by the nineteenth-century German New Testament critic David Strauss, versions of which have been echoed by many others throughout the years. Strauss asserted that a "half-dead," weak and sickly Jesus who had just endured hours of crucifixion (including the nails) and needed medical attention, who had not yet died but would soon do so, could never have convinced his disciples or anyone else just a few days later that he had been raised from the dead. Being just barely alive when he appeared, Jesus would never have been mistaken for a person who had been raised from the dead as the crucified and risen Lord of life! There is no way he would have been hailed as the "Conqueror over death and the grave, the Prince of Life." Rather, this "could only have weakened the impression" as this "could by no possibility have changed their sorrow into enthusiasm, have elevated their

²³ Quintilian, *Declamationes maiores* 6:9.

²⁴ Brown, *The Death of the Messiah, From Gethsemane to the Grave: A Commentary on the Passion Narratives in the Four Gospels*, two vols., *The Anchor Bible Reference Library*, ed. by David Noel Freedman (N.Y.: Doubleday, 1994), vol. 2, 1177-1178.

²⁵ Dunn, *Jesus Remembered, Christianity in the Making*, three vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), vol. 1, 781, especially footnote 93.

reverence into worship.” The disciples would have quickly gotten a physician rather than proclaiming Jesus raised from the dead!²⁶

Strauss’ view, in particular, has persuaded many recent critical scholars that a seriously wounded but still-living Jesus could not have inspired faith in the earliest witnesses that he had vanquished death.²⁷ As such, this view, along with other similar considerations, are taken as strong indications that Jesus did not get off the cross alive.²⁸ From a more historical perspective, John Dominic Crossan attested, “That he was crucified is as sure as anything historical can ever be.”²⁹ Marcus Borg concluded that Jesus’ execution is the “most certain fact about the historical Jesus.”³⁰

Third and lastly, is there any way to determine more closely what *may be* the most likely medical cause of death by crucifixion in *general* and Jesus’ death in *particular*? Do additional medical sources besides the few in Cook’s study help to determine some degree of likelihood in this matter? The authors of this review article, along with a medical researcher, are presently completing a summary of over 40 scholarly studies of death by crucifixion and have found that asphyxiation or asphyxiation-dominant theses are favored approximately 2:1 over the total of all the other hypotheses combined. Although not in print yet, this may at least be suggestive of an answer here.

As already indicated, among the various crucifixion techniques utilized by Romans and others, a variety of sadistic methods could be employed, with no single pattern being required. However, Cook and others have outlined a majority pattern in the case of the Roman practices, with Jesus’ crucifixion fitting the pattern of Roman “family resemblances” (418). Questions such as the actual causes of death, why some lived only briefly while others survived much longer, and so on, could still vary. So the sheer numbers of scholars just mentioned in our

²⁶ David Friedrich Strauss, *A New Life of Jesus*, second ed., two vols., no translator given (Edinburgh: Williams and Norgate, 1979), vol. 1, 412.

²⁷ Gary R. Habermas, *The Risen Jesus and Future Hope* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003), 16-17, especially endnote 71 for some of the scholars who agree.

²⁸ See the response of physician John Wilkinson (“The Incident of the Blood and Water,” *Scottish Journal of Theology*, Vol. 28 (1975), 155, 169, 172 for examples.

²⁹ Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (N.Y.: Harper Collins [Harper San Francisco], 1994), 145; cf. 154, 196, 201.

³⁰ Borg, *Jesus, A New Vision: Spirit, Culture, and the Life of Discipleship* (N.Y.: Harper Collins [Harper San Francisco], 1987), 179; cf. 178-184.

study above hardly prove that asphyxiation must be the only cause of death by crucifixion because that would not follow. At the same time, if this fairly significant majority of medical views arises from carefully derived medical reasons based on the historical descriptions, both past as well as modern, then a general direction in favor of asphyxiation still may indicate the *probability* here regarding most cases, including the instance of Jesus, as well. Thus the majority scholarly agreement in numbers may well be significant.³¹

Was Jesus' Body Buried?

We have already discussed above the more general question of burial for crucifixion victims and found that, especially for Jews in Israel, crucifixion victims and felons were usually buried.³² Add to this the legal evidence in the Roman Empire from approximately Jesus' time regarding the burial of those who were sentenced to death (386-387, 462).

In light of this, how does Cook address claims by John Dominic Crossan, Bart Ehrman, and others that Jesus may have been left on the cross to rot or buried in a shallow grave and perhaps eaten by dogs?³³ Cook objects that this description is not found in the Gospel of Peter as per Crossan, plus crucifixion victims were buried in Palestine. Whatever data is derived from the Gospels along with much-respected texts such as 1 Corinthians 15:4 provide more specific information here pertaining to Jesus, as well as archaeological help in the form of the bones of Jehohanan and other material (461-462). Crossan even agrees that Jehohanan does indicate that "a crucified person could receive honorable burial in the family tomb."³⁴ Cook's argumentation appears to be persuasive.

³¹ While Crossan also notes the use of varying crucifixion practices, he also favors asphyxiation perhaps complicated by shock as the most likely historical path to death (*Who Killed Jesus?* 135).

³² Josephus, *The Jewish War*, 4:310-317.

³³ Crossan, *Jesus*, 152-158; *Who Killed Jesus?* 160-169, 187-188. Ehrman's change from accepting the empty tomb to taking a view that is closer to Crossan's is found in his volume, *How Jesus Became God: The Exaltation of a Jewish Preacher from Galilee* (N.Y.: Harper Collins [Harper One], 2014), 151-164.

³⁴ Crossan, *Who Killed Jesus*, 168.

Conclusion

That Jesus was declared at an early date to be worthy of worship and then suffered crucifixion shocked pagans and was even difficult for believers, as Paul pointed out in 1 Corinthians 1:20-31, particularly in the case of Jews who were aware of Deuteronomy 21:22-23 (419-423, 440). The charge that Jesus was probably killed for “some sort of political troublemaking” (461) did not help, either. Yet, Christianity spread across the empire until it was declared the religion of the land in the Fourth Century. But as difficult as the initial report of crucifixion was, the apostolic belief and proclamation in the ancient world was that Jesus was raised from the dead hence, as acknowledged by Ehrman, not just “another failed Jewish prophet.”³⁵

All told, John Granger Cook’s volume is an excellent scholarly guide to the topic of crucifixion in the Mediterranean world. The number of careful details provided is simply amazing. Qualifications here and there do not dislodge this overall conclusion.

³⁵ Ehrman, *How Jesus Became God*, 174-175, with the quotation on page 174.