



Jesus and Jehohanan: An Archaeological Note on Crucifixion

Archaeological discoveries offer new information about the Roman practice of crucifixion.

by Reverend Dr. J. H. Charlesworth from *Expository Times*,
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At the beginning of the summer of 1968 a team of archaeologists under the direction of V. Tzaferis discovered four cave-tombs at Giv'at ha-Mivtar (Ras el-Masaref), which is just north of Jerusalem near Mount Scopus and immediately west of the road to Nablus. The date of the tombs, revealed by the pottery in situ, ranged from the late second century B.C. until A.D. 70. These family tombs with branching chambers, which had been hewn out of soft limestone, belong to the Jewish cemetery of Jesus' time that extends from Mount Scopus in the east to the Sanhedriya tombs in the north west.

Within the caves were found fifteen limestone ossuaries which contained the bones of thirty-five individuals. These skeletons reveal under the examination of specialists a startling tale of the turbulence and agony that confronted the Jews during the century in which Jesus lived. Nine of the thirty-five individuals had met violent death. Three children, ranging in ages from eight months to eight years, died from starvation. A child of almost four expired after much suffering from an arrow wound that penetrated the left of his skull (the occipital bone). A young man of about seventeen years burned to death cruelly bound upon a rack, as inferred by the grey and white alternate lines on his left fibula. A slightly older female also died from conflagration. An old woman of nearly sixty probably collapsed from the crushing blow of a weapon like a mace; her atlas, axis vertebrae and occipital bone were shattered. A woman in her early thirties died in childbirth, she still retained a fetus in her pelvis. Finally, and most importantly for this note, a man between twenty-four and twenty-eight years of age was crucified.

The name of the man was incised on his ossuary in letters 2 cm high: Jehohanan. He was crucified probably between A.D. 7, the time of the census revolt, and 66, the beginning of the war against Rome.... According to Dr. N. Haas of the Department of Anatomy, Hebrew University--Hadassah Medical School, Jehohanan experienced three traumatic episodes. The cleft palate on the right side and the associated asymmetries of his face likely resulted from the deterioration of his mother's diet during the first few weeks of pregnancy. The disproportion of his cerebral cranium (pladocephaly) were caused by difficulties during birth. All the marks of violence on the skeleton resulted directly or indirectly from crucifixion.

A description of Jehohanan's death would be helpful toward imaging Jesus' suffering since both were crucified by the Romans in the same century and not far from the walls of Jerusalem. The lower third of his right radial bone contains a groove that was probably caused by the friction between a nail and the bone. Hence, his arms were nailed to the patibulum through the forearms and not through the wrists, the bones of which 'were found undamaged.' It is logical to infer, therefore, that, contrary to the customary portrayal in paintings and biographies, Jesus had his arms pierced and not his hands. We should probably translate the

only two passages in the Gospels that mention of the crucified Jesus (Lk 24, Jn 20) not as 'hands', but with Hesiod, Rufus Medicus, and others as 'arms'. Hence, according to Jn 20, Jesus said to Thomas, 'place your finger here and observe my arms...'



Heel bone of crucified man

The legs had been pressed together, bent, and twisted to that the calves were parallel to the patibulum. The feet were secured to the cross by one iron nail driven simultaneously through both heels (tuber calcanei). The iron nail contains after its round head the following: sediment, fragments of wood (Pistacia or Acacia), a limy crust, a portion of the right heel bone, a smaller piece of the left heel bone, and a fragment of olive wood. It is apparent that Jehohanan had been nailed to the olive wood cross with the right foot above the left. Dr. Haas is undoubtedly correct, furthermore, in concluding that the iron nail bent approximately 2 cm because it hit a knot necessitating the

amputation of the feet to remove the corpse from the cross.

While Jehohanan was on the cross, presumably after an interval of some time, his legs were fractured. Once forcible blow from a massive weapon delivered the coup de grace, shattering the right shins into slivers, and fracturing the left ones, that were contiguous with the cross (simplex), in a simple, oblique line.

The above discoveries throw some light on the manner in which Jesus died, but the question with which we began has not been adequately answered. How could Jesus have died so soon?

Christian art has continuously portrayed Jesus as attached to the cross with his extremities fully extended. Jehohanan's torso was forced into a twisted position with his calves and thighs bent and unnaturally twisted. Since the bent nail did not secure the legs to the cross, a plank (sedecula) was probably fastened to the simplex, providing sufficient support for the buttocks and prolonging torture. If Jesus had been crucified in a similar fashion, and we cannot be certain of this although it is probable, his contorted muscles probably would have generated spasmodic contractions (tetanizations) and rigid cramps would eventually permeate the diaphragm and lungs so as to prohibit inhalation and exhalation. Jesus could have died after six hours.

The two crucified with Jesus, however, did not die so quickly--could this have been because they had not been previously tortured, or because they had been crucified in another manner? Perhaps it is logical to assume that because Jesus had been the centre of attention for at least the preceding week he might have received more of the executioners' attention prior to the final acts of crucifixion. Especially would this be the situation if the other two were crucified because they had been judged to be robbers or criminals (cf. Km 15, Mt 27, and Lk 23) but Jesus condemned for insurrection against Rome. These speculations are not wild but they do extend beyond all the available data: we can only wonder why Jehohanan was crucified, why his legs were broken, and if there were a particularly torturous crucifixion for one charged with insurrection. As we search for these answers we must remember Jesus' particular circumstance: the torture could not last more than seven hours because the approaching Sabbath must not be violated, especially near conservative Jerusalem.

In conclusion, we now have empirical evidence of a crucifixion. Death on a cross could be prolonged or swift. The crucifixion of Josephus' acquaintance who survived should not be projected to the crucifixion of Jesus. The major extrabiblical paradigm for crucifixion is no longer Josephus; it is the archaeological data summarized above. The crucifixion of Jesus, who did not possess a gladiator's physique and stamina, did not commence but culminated when he was nailed to the cross. After the brutal, all night scourging by Roman soldiers, who would have relished an opportunity to vent their hatred of the Jews and disgust for Palestinian life, Jesus was practically dead. I see not reason why the Synoptic account does not contain one of the few *bruta facta* from his life when it reports that, as he began to stagger from Herod's palace to Golgotha, he was too weak to carry the cross; Simon of Cyrene carried it for him. Metaphors should not be confused with actualities nor faith with history. It is not a confession of faith to affirm that Jesus died on Golgotha that Friday afternoon; it is a probability obtained by the highest canons of scientific historical research. The humanists' and rationalists' facile answer to the question why Jesus died so quickly is no

longer acceptable in critical circles; note, for example, the concluding remark in the most recent 'biography' of Jesus by a Jewish scholar: 'Others thought that he called out in despair: "My God, my God (Eli, Eli), why hast thou forsaken me?" And Jesus died.'

Read scholars' commentary on [Jesus' crucifixion](#).

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