

CRUCIFIXION IN ANTIQUITY

An Inquiry into the Background of the New Testament
Terminology of Crucifixion

av

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Abstract

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This study investigates the philological aspects of how ancient Greek, Latin and Hebrew/Aramaic texts, including the New Testament, depict the practice of punishment by crucifixion. A survey of the ancient text material shows that there has been a too narrow view of the “crucifixion” terminology. The various terms are not simply used in the sense of “crucify” and “cross,” if by “crucifixion” one means the punishment that Jesus was subjected to according to the main Christian traditions. The terminology is used much more diversely. Almost none of it can be elucidated beyond verbs referring vaguely to some form(s) of suspension, and nouns referring to tools used in such suspension. As a result, most of the crucifixion accounts that scholars cite in the ancient literature have to be rejected, leaving only a few. The New Testament is not spared from this terminological ambiguity. The accounts of the death of Jesus are strikingly sparse. Their chief contribution is usage of the unclear terminology in question. Over-interpretation, and probably even pure imagination, have afflicted nearly every wordbook and dictionary that deals with the terms related to crucifixion as well as scholarly depictions of what happened on Calvary. The immense knowledge of the punishment of crucifixion in general, and the execution of Jesus in particular, cannot be supported by the studied texts.

Keywords: crucifixion, cross, death of Jesus, Bible, New Testament, church, Christianity, philology, semantics, Jesus, execution, death sentence, impaling, suspension punishment, Golgotha, Calvary, ancient language, classical languages, Classical Greek, Latin, Hebrew/Aramaic, ancient Greece, Roman empire, Roman world, Jerusalem.