

CHAPTER 13

JESUS' ARREST, TRIAL, CRUCIFIXION, AND BURIAL

Part 12: The Death of Christ

[*Harmony*, pp. 212-236]

All four gospels give lengthy descriptions of the events surrounding the death of Jesus. This appears to have been a very important part of the early tradition of the church, and well taught to all new Christians. The death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus were (and are) the heart of the gospel (1 Cor 15:1-8).

Betrayal and Arrest

Sec. 153: Jesus betrayed, arrested, and forsaken

Judas had already left the disciples and gone to the Jewish leaders. Now he led a large “crowd” of Jewish leaders and Roman soldiers assigned to them to arrest Jesus. The late night hour and isolation of the garden provided ideal circumstances for the arrest, which would then arouse no immediate public disturbance.

Note how Jesus in John’s gospel is pictured as still the master of the situation, as the amazed soldiers fell backwards to the ground (John 18:6). Peter boldly struck out with a sword, cutting off the ear of Malchus, the high priest’s servant (named by John). Luke the physician is the only gospel writer who mentions that Jesus healed his ear (Luke 22:51). Matthew mentions how Jesus said he could have called twelve legions of angels (far more than the cohort of Roman soldiers in Jerusalem), but that his sufferings were voluntary, in obedience to his Father and in fulfillment of Scripture (Matt 26:53-54).

The disciples, though bold at first, quickly became fearful. Not having prepared themselves by watching and prayer, they fell into a panic and ran away, leaving Jesus alone. Matthew and Mark say they “deserted him and fled.” Mark adds the additional interesting account of the young man who fled naked. Since Mark seldom includes

material not in Matthew or Luke, many scholars believe this person may have been Mark himself.

Trial

The trial of Jesus Christ was truly a travesty of justice. Much has been written about it from a legal point of view. It is apparent that the Jewish leaders were more motivated by fear and haste than by a desire for justice (see Essay 12 in the *Harmony*, “The Arrest and Trial of Jesus,” for details and a bibliography). For the locations of the various parts of his trial, see the map of Jerusalem at the end of the *Harmony*.

The trial had six parts, three Jewish parts and three Roman parts:

1. Hearing before Annas, father-in-law of the high priest
2. Informal trial before Caiaphas, the high priest, and members of the Sanhedrin
3. Formal trial before the full Sanhedrin
4. First trial before Pilate
5. Trial before Herod Antipas
6. Second trial before Pilate

The three Jewish trials were held during the night and early morning hours, while it was still dark. The three Roman trials started at dawn and continued until his crucifixion about 9:00 a.m.

Sec. 154: First Jewish phase, before Annas

This first hearing is recorded only in John. As the head of the high priestly family Annas was consulted first. When Jesus protested this secret arrest and trial, claiming his words and actions were public, a nearby official struck him in the face. This action was calculated not only to humble Jesus, but to serve as a warning to anyone who might want to speak in his defense.

Sec. 155: Second Jewish phase, before Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin

While Luke and John mention this phase briefly, full details are given in Matthew and Mark. It was obvious at this point that the leaders were seeking to find proof against him, that he had committed some form of blasphemy or other crime. Yet the witnesses could not agree. Finally Caiaphas commanded Jesus by an oath to declare if he was “the Christ, the Son of God.” Jesus answered firmly, “Yes, I am.” He went on to declare that he would come as the Son of Man in the clouds of heaven, as was prophesied by Daniel. This clear declaration of his Messiahship gave the leaders what they wanted, evidence for a charge of blasphemy; of course, they assumed that his statement was untrue.

An interesting and ironic discovery was the recent finding of the bones of Caiaphas himself. Jesus’ body is risen, but the high priest’s bones lie in an ossuary; see “The Tomb of Caiaphas,” *Biblical Archaeology Review* 27:4 (Sept/Oct 2001) 42-43.

The three Synoptics describe the physical abuse he received at this trial. Those guarding him spit on him, hit him in the face with their fists, blindfolded him and hit him again and again, saying “Prophesy, Messiah! Who hit you?”

Sec. 156: Peter’s denials

Peter’s fall into fear and his denial of Jesus is recorded in all four gospels, a remarkable feature of these books, considering the place of Peter in the early church. All four gospels record three denials and the crowing of the rooster (Mark mentions two crowings). The order seems to have been as follows:

- Accusation of the maid who kept the gate; first denial, followed by the first crowing of the rooster
- Peter’s moving to another place in the courtyard; the second accusation of the maid, along with that of other men and women servants; second denial, with an oath
- An hour in between the second and third denials
- Accusation of several, based on his Galilean accent; third denial, with more oaths; second crowing of the rooster; Jesus looks at Peter; Peter goes out, bitterly weeping.

Luke alone mentions that, after these denials, Jesus “turned and looked straight at Peter” (Luke 22:61). This led to Peter’s realization of what he had done and his subsequent repentance. Peter was to become the leader of the disciples and the new church. This experience taught him how weak he was in himself, and his need to rely totally on the Savior.

Sec. 157: Third Jewish phase, before the Sanhedrin

The official trial before the Sanhedrin took place at dawn. When demanded again by the high priest to declare who he was, Jesus again asserted that he indeed was the Messiah. This testimony is recorded in Luke; Matthew and Mark recorded the previous confession made at the informal trial. The two testimonies were the same. The Sanhedrin concluded that he was guilty of blasphemy.

Sec. 158: Remorse and suicide of Judas Iscariot

Matthew is the only gospel recording the suicide of Judas. It is also referred to in Peter's speech in Acts 1. The two accounts can be harmonized easily (see *Harmony*, p. 219, n. w).

Unlike Peter, whose sorrow led to repentance and trust in God's forgiveness, Judas experienced only the sorrow of remorse; he despaired of God's mercy. Apparently he threw the money of his betrayal directly into the temple—a desperate act, and then hanged himself. His body fell to the rocks below, either at the time he hanged himself, or later, when he was cut down (Acts 1:18-19). Matthew's interest in the later use of the money shows his continuing interest in the Jewish nation, as does his later description of the actions of the Jewish leaders after Jesus' resurrection.

Sec. 159: First Roman phase, before Pilate

While mentioned in all four gospels, this meeting is expanded upon in John. The Jews needed permission from the governor in order to execute capital punishment. They brought Jesus to him, but refused to enter his palace, lest they be defiled and unable to eat the Passover sacrifices during the day. When giving the charge to Pilate, they changed the accusation from blasphemy, which he would not recognize, to that of opposition to Caesar—opposing paying of taxes and setting himself up as a king. Of course, this change of accusation was patently unethical and illegal.

Pilate was impressed by Jesus' demeanor and answers. Jesus explained what sort of king he was and that he was not seeking to overturn the Roman government. He did not say his kingdom was never to be physical, only that it was not of earthly origin (see *Harmony*, p. 221, n. x). Jesus asserted his authority, and that Pilate's authority came from the Father.

When the Jewish leaders made further accusations, Jesus refused to answer. Pilate was amazed, but he had all he needed to make a fair judgment. However, he was a cynic—"What is truth?" Pilate was fearful of counteracting the Jewish leaders, and when he found out that Jesus came from Galilee, he sent him to Herod, who happened to be in Jerusalem at the time for Passover.

Sec. 160: Second Roman phase, before Herod Antipas

Only Luke records this interlude in the Roman trial before Pilate. Luke had contacts with people who knew Herod Antipas. He was familiar with Joanna, wife of Chuza, a steward in Antipas's household in Galilee (Luke 8:3), and with Menahem, Antipas's foster-brother or boyhood friend, who later became a Christian and a leader in the church at Antioch, where Luke probably came from ("Manean" in Acts 13:1).

Herod was not interested in justice for his subject, only in seeing this wonder-worker. He already had more than enough information, having heard it from John the Baptist before murdering him. Jesus answered none of his questions nor any of the accusations his enemies made against him. Frustrated and disappointed, Herod allowed his soldiers to mock Jesus further, dressing him in an elegant robe.

Luke makes the interesting remark that this common interest in Jesus caused Herod and Pilate to become friends again, for they had been enemies (Luke 23:12). This may refer to the earlier outrage of Pilate, who had killed some of Herod's subjects from Galilee (Luke 13:1).

Sec. 161: Third Roman phase, before Pilate

All four gospels record the final phase of Jesus' trial, before Pilate again. At the end of his first trial Pilate had declared that there was "not one fault in him" (John 18:38 Greek). But instead of rendering a clearly just verdict, Pilate tried convincing the Jewish leaders and people to agree, wavered, and then condemned a man he knew to be innocent.

Matthew mentions the warning Pilate received from his wife (Matt 27:19). At first he tried to convince the Jews to drop or mitigate the charges. When that didn't work he tried having Jesus released and Barabbas executed; but the leaders stirred up the people to ask for Barabbas' release, ironically a man "who was clearly guilty of the crime they had accused Jesus of committing" (*Harmony*, p. 223, n. z).

Finally Pilate had Jesus flogged (John 18:1), the terrible scourging given to condemned men before crucifixion. In addition, his soldiers abused him and mocked him with the crown of thorns, a robe, and a reed, beating him again and again. As Jesus was dragged out again to the crowd, barely alive, Pilate hoped they would be satisfied and take pity on him. However, they all the more violently called for his death.

In a private interview Jesus reminded Pilate of his place under God to rule rightly, but said that the Jewish leaders had the greater sin. Later, Peter summarized their guilt in these words:

Acts 3:13-15 ¹³The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of our fathers, has glorified his servant Jesus. You handed him over to be killed, and you disowned

him before Pilate, though he had decided to let him go. ¹⁴ You disowned the Holy and Righteous One and asked that a murderer be released to you. ¹⁵ You killed the author of life, but God raised him from the dead. We are witnesses of this.

The Jewish leaders fully understood this accusation against them: “We strictly charged you not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching, and you intend to bring this man's blood upon us” (Acts 5:28).

Outside again, the Jews increased their demands, threatening Pilate with disloyalty to Caesar if he did not condemn this man. Pilate, afraid of his position, succumbed and delivered Jesus to death. Matthew reports that he washed his hands, accepting no responsibility, and that all the people there answered, “Let his blood be on us and on our children!” (Matt 27:25). This horrible curse later would come upon them.

Crucifixion

Sec. 162: Mockery by the Roman soldiers

Matthew and Mark describe additional mocking and beatings the Roman soldiers heaped on Jesus in the Praetorium after the verdict was delivered. This appears similar to but more severe than that described by John, which had taken place before the verdict was given (John 19:1-3).

Sec. 163: Journey to Golgotha

The distance from the Praetorium to the traditional site of the crucifixion is about half a mile. In Jesus' weakened condition from sleeplessness and anxiety, the beatings, and the terrible scourging, he was not able to carry the crossbeam; so Simon from Cyrene was taken from the crowd and forced to carry it. Apparently Mark's readers in Rome were familiar with his son Rufus (Mark 15:21; cf. Rom 16:13).

Luke, who emphasizes women, recounts the words Jesus gave to the women of Jerusalem who were weeping for him: the city would face worse trials than these in time to come.

The traditional site of Golgotha is in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre; it goes back to a very early tradition. In Jesus' day this location was just outside the city wall. The rival site of Gordon's Calvary is far to the north of the old city. While a much more attractive site to modern sensibilities, Gordon's Calvary lacks serious historical evidence as the original site of Golgotha.

Sec. 164: First three hours of crucifixion

All four gospels give an account of the crucifixion. While there is much overlapping, several items are mentioned in only one or two gospels.

Jesus was crucified about 9:00 a.m. (Mark 15:25; cf. John 19:14). This is an approximate time, “the middle of the morning”; so the morning period of the crucifixion could be any time between one and three hours. The sign placed on the cross, normally declaring the crime of the victim, this time said, “This is the King of the Jews” in three languages. John reports the conversation between the Jewish leaders and Pilate about this sign.

During the morning hours on the cross Jesus is reported to have uttered three “sayings”

1. To his Father, about the Roman soldiers, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do” (in Luke; text doubtful—rated by UBS {C})
2. To the repentant robber on the cross, “Today you will be with me in Paradise.” (in Luke)
3. To Mary his mother, “Dear woman, here is your son,” and to John “Here is your mother.” (in John)

All three of these sayings are directed to the benefit of others. During all this time he was the object of continual mocking and ridicule from the crowds below.

Sec. 165: Last three hours of the crucifixion

The three Synoptics mention the transition that occurred at the second half of Jesus’ time on the cross. From 12:00 noon until 3:00 p.m. there was darkness over all the land. This darkness was an indication of God’s judgment against sin in the person of his Son. During these hours Jesus bore the full weight of our sin and endured the wrath of the just God. All of Jesus’ recorded four sayings during these hours are near the end, just before he died. They all show Jesus’ relation to his Father in one aspect or another.

4. “*Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani*—My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (spoken in Aramaic, his native tongue; transliterated and then translated into Greek by the Gospel writer; Matthew and Mark begin with the Aramaic form *Eloi*; some early MSS of Matthew have the Hebrew form *Eli* (see Metzger, *Textual Commentary*, 58).
5. “I am thirsty.” (in John)
6. “It is finished.” (in John)

7. “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.” (in Luke)

The first two of these sayings are linked to Psalm 22 (vv. 1, 14-15); this psalm certainly is Messianic, showing the sufferings of the Messiah, and God’s supporting hand for him. This “cry of dereliction” reveals the awful spiritual punishment inflicted on Jesus. They are further related in that the word *Eloi* was mistaken for *Elijah*. The third saying was probably the same as the “loud cry” referred to by Matthew all three Synoptic gospels; as he gathered his last strength, he called out that he had finished all that God the Father had given him to do; the covenant of redemption was fulfilled. The final saying shows the completeness of his sacrifice and its acceptance by God. Jesus’ spirit did not go to hell, but to Paradise.

SPECIAL NOTE ON CRUCIFIXION

There were three types of crosses used in Roman times: “St. Anthony’s cross,” shaped like a T; “St. Andrew’s cross,” shaped like an X; and the traditional Latin cross, *crux immissa*, with four arms. According to Matt 27:37, the superscription was above the head of Jesus, suggesting that the traditional Latin cross was used for Jesus. Usually the upright beam was already sunken in the ground. The victim carried the crossbeam to the site of execution. His forearms were nailed to the beam on the ground; then that beam was pulled up by ropes and fastened to the upright. Often a peg was stuck in the upright for the victim to straddle, thus prolonging the torture.

Recently excavations around the Jerusalem temple have uncovered the remains of a first century Jew who was crucified. This is the first such discovery. In his case a single spike passed through his ankles, with feet held together, and a wooden plaque prevented the feet from coming off the nail. For details, see Benjamin Mazar, *The Mountain of the Lord*, 228-29; also *Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, Supp. Vol., 199-200. Photos and illustrations are available in Vassilios Tzaferis, “Crucifixion—The Archaeological Evidence,” *Biblical Archaeology Review* 11:1 (Jan/Feb, 1985) 44-53.

Interpreters’ Dictionary of the Bible 1/747: “The cruelty of this form of capital punishment lay in the public shame that was involved and in its slow physical torture.

“a. The public shame. Partly as a warning to other potential offenders, the condemned man was made to carry his cross, or the transverse part, along the public roads and to the execution ground, which itself was nearly always in a public place. There he was stripped of all his clothing. Affixed to the cross, he could not care for his bodily needs, and was the object of taunts and indignities from passers-by.

“b. The torture. Crucifixion damaged no vital part of the body. The victim, set astride a peg in the upright beam, was fastened to the cross by nails through the hands or

wrists, and through the feet or above the heels. Ropes bound the shoulders or torso to the wooden frame. He was thus held immobile, unable to cope with heat or cold or insects. Death came slowly—often after many days—as the result of fatigue, cramped muscles, hunger, and thirst.”

New Bible Dictionary, 282: “Death by this method was usually quite protracted, . . . The pain was obviously intense, as the whole body was strained, while the hands and feet, which are a mass of nerves and tendons, would lose little blood. After a while, the arteries of head and stomach would be surcharged with blood, causing a throbbing headache, and eventually traumatic fever and tetanus would set in. When for any reason it was proposed to put the sufferer out of his misery before the end, as if to compensate for the abbreviated suffering, the legs were shattered with blows from a club or hammer and the coup de grace was dealt with a sword or lance, usually in the side.”

For an authoritative, detailed account of the physical sufferings of Jesus from a modern medical perspective, see William D. Edwards, Wesley J. Gabel, and Floyd E. Hosmer, “On the Physical Death of Jesus Christ,” *Journal of the American Medical Association* 255:11 (Mar. 21, 1986) 1455-1463 (now online at <http://www.godandscience.org/apologetics/deathjesus.pdf>).

See also Hans-Ruedi Weber, *The Cross, Tradition and Interpretation*, and esp. Leon Morris, *The Cross in the New Testament*. An understanding of all the horrors of the cross helps us to love more our Lord Jesus, and appreciate its significance. Cf. 1 Cor 1:17-18; Gal 5:11; 6:12-14; Col 1:19-20; Phil 2:8; Heb 12:2.

Sec. 166: Witnesses of Jesus’ death

The Synoptics record that the curtain in the temple was torn, top to bottom. This graphically revealed that the way to God was no longer through the temple, but directly through Christ. It also symbolized the coming judgment on that temple, city, and nation. Matthew adds that there was a great earthquake, and that several people were raised back to life (probably after Jesus’ resurrection; cf. Matt 27:53).

Matthew states that there were four extraordinary or miraculous witnesses to Jesus’ death: (1) darkness over all the land, (2) the curtain in the temple torn in two, (3) earthquake and rocks split, and (4) tombs opened and people raised to life (Matt 27:45-53).

The Babylonian Talmud states that 40 years before the temple was destroyed (thus, ca. A.D. 30) the Shekinah glory departed:

- The lot for the Yom Kippur goat ceased to be supernatural

- The red cord of wool that used to change to white (as a symbol of God's forgiveness) now remained red and did not change
- The western lamp in the lampstand in the sanctuary refused to burn continually
- The doors of the temple would open by themselves
(Yoma 39:b; www.menorah.org/whentlir.html)

[For the theological use of this miraculous event by the different Synoptic writers and by the book of Hebrews, see Daniel M. Gurtner, "The Veil of the Temple in History and Legend," *JETS* 49:1 (March 2006) 97-114. Especially interesting is the inclusio between Mark 1:10 and 15:38-39, showing Jesus as the "Son of God." He also compares and contrasts the biblical accounts with similar accounts in pagan, Jewish, and Christian traditions.]

The centurion, impressed by Jesus' words and demeanor, declared his faith in him (even as Jesus had prayed for their sins to be forgiven them). Many of the women who followed Jesus are named in Matthew and Mark as witnesses of all these events at the crucifixion.

Burial

Not only was Jesus killed, but his death was fully witnessed as complete, as shown by the events of his burial. The actual death of Jesus was vital to the completing of the requirements to pay for our sins. It was central to the gospel, and thus emphasized in the gospels.

Sec. 167: Certification of Jesus' death and procurement of his body, Jesus' body placed in a tomb

While John does not mention the conversion of the Centurion, he does record the proof of Jesus' death. The Romans broke the legs of the thieves to kill them, but Jesus was already dead. This was proved by the water and blood coming from his side from the spear wound. Most take the water to be water from the lining of the lung, caused by the stress placed on the breathing system by crucifixion. John later emphasized water and blood as theologically significant (1 John 5:6-8.). John's own witness to this is emphasized (John 19:35). The Scripture fulfilled in his bones not being broken appears to be not Psalm 34:20, but the requirement for the Paschal lamb in Exodus 12:46. The other Scripture referred to by John is Zechariah 12:10; this piercing did not fulfill that prophecy, but was a requirement for its future fulfillment, when Jesus returns (cf. Rev 1:7).

All the gospels mention Joseph of Arimathea, a wealthy member of the Sanhedrin, who obtained the body of Jesus. Early rationalists made him out to be a secret conspirator to fake the death and resurrection of Jesus, but that wild idea is no longer suggested by serious scholars.

John mentions that Nicodemus joined with Joseph in preparing the body for burial. Nicodemus brought 75 pounds of expensive ointments. This is the third time that John mentions Nicodemus; he is not mentioned at all in the other gospels.

Jesus' body was placed in Joseph's tomb just before sundown on Friday ("the Jewish day of Preparation"; John 19:42). No work was allowed on the Sabbath, which began at sundown. Final preparations for burial would have to wait until the Sabbath was over, which would be Sunday morning.

Sec. 168: The tomb watched by the women and guarded by the soldiers

Matthew and Mark name the women who witnessed the burial of Jesus as Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joseph; Luke just says "the women who had come with Jesus from Galilee." Luke reports that they went home to prepare spices to use on Sunday.

Matthew alone tells of the arrangements between the chief priests and Pharisees and Pilate for the military guard and the seal for the tomb. This took place on "the next day, the one after Preparation Day," which would be either Friday night or Saturday during the day. The editors of the *Harmony* note that the Jewish leaders had a better understanding of Jesus' predictions of his resurrection than the disciples did at that time (p. 236, n. m).