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Why Did He Die in Three Hours?

Thoughts on the Crucifixion

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Many problems exist with our understanding of crucifixion looking backward approximately 2,000 years. We know Constantine abolished crucifixions about 337 A.D. so that there is no known personal experience since that time of individuals reporting on crucifixions. Two events which add to our knowledge, however, and give us some insight as to how crucifixion was performed and what happened to the individual would be the Shroud of Turin which is probably the most important, and secondly, in 1968 in a Jewish cemetery — Givat ha Mivtar — in which the bones of a crucified individual, Johanaham, were identified with the nail being transfixing through the ankle bone and with scrape marks being identified on the radius bone. Other than these two events, we are limited to what the ancient historians and writers had to say about crucifixion.

One of the problems is the length of time an individual survived while hanging on the cross. We know it was considered one of the most horrible forms of death and that it was done to large numbers of people, mostly slaves, rebels, and the misfits of the country. It was also used extensively during the conquest of countries. We know from the ancient Roman and Jewish writers that individuals on the cross could survive from hours to overnight to several days. In reference to the hours, one must consider the report of Dr. Hynek during World War I. He observed the punishment inflicted in the Austro-German army, called "Aufbinden." This consisted of hanging a condemned individual by his two hands or leather straps from a post, with the tips of the feet scarcely touching, or just off the ground. This was reported also in Dr. Barbet's book, *Doctor at Calvary*, in which he quotes witnesses who saw prisoners hung by their wrists in the Dachau concentration camp — hanging which was similar to that described above by Dr. Hynek.

Breathing Difficulties

In hanging, these individuals soon had difficulty breathing. To release this difficulty, the victims had to draw themselves up by their arms (chinning oneself). By this method, they were able to relieve the asphyxia or difficult breathing. They could hold themselves up somewhere between 30 to 60 seconds. As this continued, the ability to raise oneself up became less and less. There was associated with this a profuse sweating terminally, and death with extreme rigidity, with the head falling forward. Death usually occurred somewhere around three hours. Dr. Modder in Cologne noted that in hanging students by straps, considerable difficulty occurred within 30 minutes, and Father Wyeland, a sculptor, on 31 suspensions of himself from a cross with leather straps was able to remain suspended in the neighborhood of 20 to 35 minutes. From my own personal experience, 10 minutes was sufficient. Dr. Zugibe was somewhere around 45 minutes.

In the above instances, of course, the experimental methods are in terms of minutes, certainly less than an hour. However, none of these went on to death, where in the instances reported by Drs. Hynek and Barbet, which went on to death, the individuals survived around three hours.

As the ancient writers tell us, there were many ways of crucifixion. Seneca indicates probably as many ways as there were bodies to be crucified, indicating a wide variety of positions and methods available to the executioners. So the method of crucifixion and position may affect how long the individual survived. If the individuals were in a hanging position, and a struggle to breathe became a problem, pushing up would be necessary to relieve the asphyxia. If the individual was more impaled or fixed in the upright position, then the survival time would be much longer, and the possible causes of death in these instances would be different (i.e., exposure or dehydration), and thus death might take many days.

The ancient writers tell us that in most instances torture was a preliminary event to crucifixion, and the most common form appeared to be scourging. There has been some question as to whether scourging and other forms of torture were used in an attempt to hasten death by crucifixion since in many reported cases the torture by crucifixion was so severe that the soldiers not infrequently would hasten the death of their victims to relieve them of the agony of the cross.

Prolonging Crucifixion

The question of a sedil continually presents itself in the literature and is mentioned particularly by Drs. Barbet, Hynek and Father Blust. When a sedil was used it was probably done to prolong the time factors of crucifixion since the individual, in a sense, would be sitting on a peg and thus the problem of respiration would not be as critical, depending on where the peg was inserted. The cause of death here would be entirely different than for an individual fixed in a hanging position.

Questions also arise as to whether a foot rest (suppedaneum) was used and if it prolonged the torture. Some ancient artworks suggest the individual standing on a bar. These appear to occur in the late third and fifth centuries. Again, if used, this would give more support to the body and thus would act more like the individual impaled on the cross rather than hanging on the cross.

We know that in Judea bodies were taken down at sundown which was a requirement of the Jewish religion so the land would not be defiled. Scourging may have been more severe, to hasten death, and certainly, Roman soldiers were experts in torture and death and knew how long it would take to die on the cross. To conform to Jewish law, isn't it possible that the method of crucifixions conformed to meet these requirements? In Judea a faster death was needed. Therefore, the hanging position was used which was known to bring on death in approximately a three to six hour time frame. This would satisfy the Jewish people by having the bodies removed by sundown, and also would serve the court sentence of death by crucifixion.
