

## THE BURIAL OF JESUS

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TRADITION claims John, the disciple whom Jesus loved, as author of the Fourth Gospel. That is in all probability true, but does not guarantee the genuineness of every statement found in the present text. The original memoirs of John may have been enlarged by later additions, derived from post-apostolic sources. At the same time, important parts of the Johannine booklet may have been lost before the present Gospel was composed.

The account of the burial of Jesus, John xix. 31-37, begins: *The Jews . . . asked of Pilate that their legs be broken, and that they might be taken away. The soldiers therefore came and broke their legs. . . .* The statement is short and offers apparently no difficulty. *The Jews* who call upon the Roman governor are evidently the mortal enemies of Jesus who had brought about his ignominious death. But we have to bear in mind that their number was very small. Our Gospel calls them in other places: *The chief priests and The Pharisees*. The First Gospel speaks of *The chief priests and the elders of the people*, Mark and Luke of *the chief priests and the scribes*. The meaning is the same in all three cases. The chief priests were a small group of priests, entitled by birth to fill the position of high priest. The Pharisees, scribes, or elders of the people were the famous rabbis who, few in number, interpreted the law of Moses in the temple.

While that is perfectly clear, it is difficult or rather impossible to understand why they should be called *the Jews*. The supposed author was a Jew himself, just as Jesus and all his followers. His friends outnumbered indeed by far his enemies. But the latter, not the Jewish people, met the ear of Pilate. Under these circumstances, John could never have called the few men who brought about the death of Jesus *the Jews*. He would have employed the

term *the chief Priests and the Pharisees* just as does John vii. 32, 45 and xi 47, 57.

We cannot suppose John to have renounced in his later life his Jewish nationality and religion. For Jesus had instructed all his personal disciples, including John:

"Go not in any way of the Gentiles and enter not into any city of the Samaritans; but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel!" (Matthew x. 5 f, comp. vii. 6 and Galatians ii. 12 ff.)

The word *Jews* in our passage points clearly to a Gentile Christian writer who, ignorant of the true history of Jesus, had come to regard with all his contemporaries the entire Jewish nation as directly responsible for the crucifixion of Jesus. That is still the popular idea. For even to-day, one may hear a Jew called *Christ killer*. Therefore, we have to replace the word *Jews* by the original Johannine expression *the chief priests and the Pharisees*. The change was made probably after the year 150 to judge by Justin Martyr's Dialogue with Trypho.

There are two more statements in verse 31 which owe their uncalled for presence in the text to ignorant Gentile commentators. They attempted to explain why the bodies of the men on the cross were taken down before nightfall, something the Romans never did outside of Palestine. The first clause reads: *because it was the preparation, that the bodies should not remain on the cross upon the Sabbath*. But no Jewish law forbids bodies of evildoers to hang upon the cross during the Sabbath. That means the Jews would not have become excited if the Romans had crucified a criminal on that day. The second commentator must have been aware of that fact. He added therefore: *for the day of that Sabbath was a high day*. According to him, a few Sabbath-days, including that of the Passover week, were too holy to permit criminals to be executed on them:

The true solution of the difficulty is offered by the law found in Deuteronomy xxi. 22 f:

And if a man have committed a sin worthy of death, and he be put to death and thou hang him on a tree; *his body shall not remain all night on the tree; but thou shalt surely bury him the same day*. For he that is hanged is accursed of God. That thou defile not the land which Jahveh thy God giveth thee for an inheritance.

This law is illustrated in Joshua viii 29, x. 26 f, etc. There

we learn how Joshua treated the king of Ai and, later on, the kings of Jerusalem, Hebron, Jarmuth, Lachish, and Eglon. The Israelites did not crucify living persons, but hanged only corpses of evildoers on a cross. That was done to render them accursed of God. But the bodies had to be taken down and interred the same day before the sun set. Otherwise the land of Israel would have been defiled.

The Romans crucified only living people, but left their bodies on the cross until nothing but the bones remained. These dropped by and by to the ground at the foot of the cross and produced in course of time a calvary, or golgotha.

These facts render it clear why the chief priests and rabbis, accompanied in all probability by an orator, that is an interpreter, (cp. Acts xxiv. 1) went in the afternoon to Pilate with the request, or petition of having the legs of the crucified men broken and their bodies removed. That implied of course, a burial similar to that of the five kings of Josh. x. 27. As executions at Jerusalem were of frequent occurrence, there was very likely in the immediate neighborhood of Golgotha some kind of underground charnel-house into which the crushed bodies were thrown.

The Roman governors of Palestine modified apparently in times of peace the Roman way of crucifying so as to have it agree as much as possible with the ancient law of the Jews. But they seem to have insisted on being asked each time by the religious representatives of the Jewish nation. The breaking of the legs and interring of the remains was always a special favor. Whenever the Roman governors were dissatisfied with the behavior of the Jews, the corpses remained on the cross just as in any other imperial province.

Therefore, when the chief priests and the rabbis asked Pilate to break the legs and remove the bodies of the crucified men, they did not suggest a new way of handling such criminals but referred simply to a long established practice.

Every Palestinian reader of the short account of John understood what was done with the body of Jesus. Both that centurion and the four soldiers who had charge of the execution, knew what to do when they received the order of Pilate. Nor would they change in any way their regular procedure. Whether the men on the cross were dead or still living, the soldiers would crush their legs before they threw the remains into the charnel-house.

German scholars (Preuschen, *Handwörterbuch zum Neuen*

*Testament*) translate the Greek verb at the end of verse 31 *to take down*, namely from the cross. The American Revised Version, however, renders it *to take away*. That is without doubt the proper translation. For the original meaning of the Greek verb is *to take up, to raise, to lift* and then *to lift and take away, to remove*. (Liddell & Scott, *Greek-English Lexicon*). That refers, of course, to the removal of the crushed bodies.

The *taking down from the cross* had to precede as a matter of fact the breaking of the legs. The cross and especially the cross-bar, or patibulum did not offer resistance enough to permit the breaking of the bones, while the corpses were still hanging there. The soldiers had first to loosen the hands and, when necessary the feet, so that the body would drop to the ground. Then they would hit the legs and thighs with heavy hammers until they were beaten into pulp. The idea was not only to make sure of the death of the criminals, but also to disfigure them as much as possible. Even in Hades or Sheol their shades should announce them as accursed of God.

Thus the original Johannine text is very short and reads: *The chief priests and the Pharisees asked of Pilate that their legs might be broken and that they might be taken away. The soldiers therefore came and brake their legs and took them away.* Modern readers may consider that as too short. But it is without doubt all a Jewish eye-witness had to tell his own people; and even Gentiles, at least such as had been in Palestine, understood perfectly the meaning of those words.

The Romans believed in a reign of terror and even in times of peace transgressors of the law were nailed to the cross everywhere in large numbers. "In Judae the punishment was frequently used. Thus Varo crucifid 2000 rioters after the death of Herod the Great. Under Claudius and Nero various governors, Tiberius Alexander, Quadratus, Felix, Florus, crucified robbers and rioters of political and religious character, including two sons of Judas Galilaeus, and even respectable citizens and Roman knights. Titus crucified so many after the destruction of Jerusalem that there was neither wood for the crosses nor place to set them up. Especially under Tiberius, who held that simple death was escape, was this method of punishment frequent." (*Dict. of the Bible*, Vol. I, p. 528.)

The term "the Jews" at the beginning of John xix. 31 has been shown to belong to a Gentile Christian. He must have changed

the original text at a comparatively late date. For as long as Jewish Christians were connected with the Gentile churches as seems to have been the rule at least with the converts of Paul, they would have protested against the wanton change. The same man has added also verse 32b-37. His intention was to remove what, according to Paul, the Gentiles regarded as *the foolishness* of the death of Jesus. (1 Cor. i. 33.) They could not think of any religious leader, except as a God. But a God could not be crucified or harmed by men. We are fortunately enabled to determine at what date that spurious passage was joined to the writings of John.

Verse 32b-37, beginning *of the first and of the second that was crucified with him* presents an entirely new account of the burial of Jesus. The soldiers, instead of following their routine, pierce only the side of Jesus with a spear and that so carefully as not to break a single bone. They did not act as hardened soldiers, but like men in a trance, forced by some supernatural power to fulfill, against their will and without their knowledge, certain false Old Testament prophecies concerning the Messiah.

These are quoted in verse 36 and 37 respectively. The first reads: *A bone of him shall not be broken.* The Bible does not contain such a prophecy. Our writer has invented it, borrowing the words from Numbers ix. 12. There we read: *They shall leave none of it until the morning nor break a bone thereof.* The noun to which *of it* and *thereof* refer is the Passover lamb. Exodus xii. 46 presents a parallel reading. *In one house shall it be eaten. Thou shalt not carry forth ought of the flesh abroad out of the house; neither shall ye break a bone thereof.*

In the first place, each of these two statements is nothing more nor less than a commandment. Besides, the breaking of the bones is forbidden, not when the lamb was killed, but after it had been eaten. The lambs were prepared at the temple during the afternoon of the 14th of Nisan. They were eaten the next night on the 15th of Nisan. The explanation of the commandment Num. ix. 12 and Ex. xii. 46 is easily given. The Jews just like other people were used to break the bones in order to get the marrow when they had meat. But that was expressly forbidden when they ate the Passover lamb. For that was a religious, not an every day meal. It was only the absolute ignorance of the religious customs of the Jews among the Gentiles which permitted the Gentile author of John xix. 32b ff.

to offer a spurious prophecy and story of what the Roman soldiers did with the dead body of Jesus.

That is the case also with the second prophecy, taken from Zechariah xii. 10. Verse 37 quotes the words: *They shall look on him they pierced* and refers to verse 34: *One of the soldiers with a spear pierced his side.*

H. G. Mitchell, author of an excellent commentary on Zechariah, published in *Scribner's International Critical Commentary*, informs us, page 330: *To pierce is generally to put to death.* That is to say, to pierce does not mean Zech. xii 10 to pierce one's side with a spear. It denotes in the Old Testament *to inflict mortal wound with any kind of weapon.*

But what was even more important, Prof. Mitchell states, also in agreement with all Old Testament scholars: *The act of piercing the nameless victim belongs to the past. This means that the one pierced is not the Messiah, whose advent, as all will agree, was still future when these words were written, but someone who had at the time already suffered martyrdom.* Since Zechariah xii. 10 does not mention the Messiah but refers to a past happening, the author of John xix 32b-37 is here again guilty of offering a fictitious account of what he tells has happened to the corps of Jesus during the interval between his death and interment.

That, of course, rejects likewise as unhistorical the attempt of representing the crucified Jesus as *the Lamb of God that taketh away the sin of the world.* No Jew could ever have conceived that idea. The Passover lamb was not the symbol of the wrath of God, but of His boundless love of his chosen people. The *scapegoat* that was driven into the desert on the day of Atonement, was supposed to take away the sin of the nation.

To the Jews of the age of Christ, God was not a blood-thirsty monster, but their loving and forgiving Father. They had, of course, to obey, serve, and trust in Him if they desired to be sure of His love. Jesus ended the work of the prophets and offered to his people the final revelation of what was really demanded of them.

The Gentiles were not ripe enough in religious experience to understand the revelation of Jesus. They were and are looking for an easy way into heaven. The mere belief into the saving power of the blood shed by Jesus with out any moral effect and progress on their part, was their idea of what they called redemption.

There remains of John 32b-37 the statement: *And straightway,*

*there came out blood and water.* The question is not whether blood and water will flow from the body of a man two hours after his death. For we are dealing with a miracle or rather the mystic symbol of the bloody atonement for the sin of the entire human race and of the origin of the water of baptism. T. Cotterhill has given us in his version of the Rock of Ages the shortest and clearest explanation of it when he says:

Lest the water and the blood,  
From Thy wounded side which flowed,  
Be of sin the double cure.  
Save from wrath and make me pure.

No Jewish disciple of Jesus could ever have arrived at such a conclusion. Only a Gentile Christian, absolutely ignorant of the aims of Jesus and the conditions under which he lived, labored, and died could invent such a story which appealed to the Gentiles and spread like wild-fire over the whole Roman world. The tidal wave of superstition swallowed even the Jewish Christians of Palestine so as to leave no trace of them. That was, under the banner inscribed *Ignatius*, the tragic fulfillment of the warning of Jesus.

Give not that which is holy unto the dogs,  
Neither cast your pearls before the swine,  
Lest haply they trample them under their feet,  
And turn and rend you!—(Matthew vii. 6.)