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# Crucifixion in the Roman World: The Use of Nails at the Time of Christ

John C. Robison

*One of the most difficult misconceptions to resolve concerning crucifixion is the question of how a person was attached to the cross. Even in the well-known case of Jesus, we are never told how he was fastened to the cross. Consequently, many arguments and debates have arisen: Were individuals nailed to the cross? If so, was the nailing confined to the hands or were the feet also included? A careful analysis of the literature, the historical context, and the archeological evidence demonstrates that the use of nails in crucifixion is sufficiently attested at the time of Christ to validate the supposition that he was indeed nailed to the cross.*

Since the time of Jesus many questions, theories, debates, and misconceptions have arisen in relation to crucifixion. While much is known concerning crucifixion, the answers to many questions still elude us. One of the most debated questions at present is the method of how a person was attached to the cross.<sup>1</sup> One reason for the persistence of this question is that until 1968, there was absolutely no archaeological evidence that substantiated crucifixion.

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<sup>1</sup> Some have pointed to a collection of seventeen skeletons discovered at the port of Athens from the seventh century B.C. (see Brown, 950). But these skeletons, rather than being pierced, had only iron rings *around* their necks, hands, and feet, not through them. Thus, while this might be a precursor to crucifixion, it is not proof of it. Actually Irving Barkan, "Capital Punishment in Ancient Athens," (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1935), (Private ed., Chicago:

Some would argue that only ropes were employed in crucifixion.<sup>2</sup> Others, like Hengel, state that nails were almost always used, and ropes were the exception<sup>3</sup>—the majority of scholars fall somewhere in between.<sup>4</sup> While each party presents its own arguments, no definitive conclusions have so far been reached.

A careful analysis of the written sources adds much to our knowledge of this subject. After reviewing the literature dealing with nailing and tying, a brief historical overview of crucifixion will be presented, along with certain limitations inherent in this study. Earlier misunderstandings will then be identified after which a detailed analysis of nails and ropes will be attempted; for the literature, historical context, and archeological evidence combine to suggest that nailing was a prevalent practice utilized by the Romans in the first century A.D.

## Review of Literature

In the opening years of the twentieth century, the standard view regarding crucifixion was that “the sufferer . . . was bound to

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Dist. by the University of Chicago Libraries, 1936), 63–7, uses this in describing a punishment called *apotympanismos*. This involved the binding of criminals and such to boards with “cramp irons” until they expired.

<sup>2</sup> Joachim Jeremias, *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus*, trans. Norman Perrin from the German 3d ed., 1960 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981), 223; E. Brandenburger, “Σταυρός, Kreuzigung Jesu und Kreuzestheologie,” *Wort und Dienst, Jahrbuch der theologischen Schule Bethel* 10 (1969): 18; cf. Paul Winter, *On the Trial of Jesus*, 2d ed., rev. and ed. by T. A. Burkill and Geza Vermes (Berlin; New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1974), 95.

<sup>3</sup> Martin Hengel, *Crucifixion in the Ancient World and the Folly of the Message of the Cross*, trans. John Bowden (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977), 31–32.

<sup>4</sup> See for instance J. H. Charlesworth, “Jesus and Jehohanan: An Archeological Note on Crucifixion,” *The Expository Times* 84 (1972–3): 149–50; Joseph Zias and Eliezer Sekeles, “The Crucified Man form Giv’at ha-Mivtar: A Reappraisal,” *Israel Exploration Journal* 35 (1985): 26 (hereafter cited as Zias and Sekeles 1985); and Raymond E. Brown, *The Death of the Messiah* (New York: Doubleday, 1994), 949.

[the cross] with cords. He was then . . . fastened with . . . nails to the wood of the cross.”<sup>5</sup> In 1932, a study was undertaken by Joseph Hewitt entitled “The Use of Nails in the Crucifixion.”<sup>6</sup> Hewitt sought to demonstrate that the popular view of Jesus’ crucifixion—at least in regards to his feet being nailed—was based “on the slenderest of foundations.”<sup>7</sup> The bulk of his work focused on artistic representations of crucifixion, ably demonstrating that the use of nails in art and the blood shown in those works followed theological more than historical precedent. He also concluded that ropes were most frequently to bind one to the cross and, subsequently, the feet were rarely, if ever, nailed. Disappointingly though, he devoted less than a third of his work to written sources,<sup>8</sup> leaving much to be researched in this area.

Despite its limitations, Hewitt’s study became the standard source in regards to the use of nails and ropes in crucifixion for the next four decades, and it still remains a prominent source today. His results and earlier scholarly opinion, as well as the need for further research, are noted in the writings of such prominent scholars as Joseph Blinzler, Joachim Jeremias, and Paul Winter

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<sup>5</sup> *Catholic Encyclopedia*, 1913, s.v. “Cross and Crucifix,” 519; W. Adams Brown, “Cross,” *A Dictionary of the Bible* vol. 1, ed. James Hasting (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark; New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1903), 529.

<sup>6</sup> J. W. Hewitt, “The Use of Nails in the Crucifixion,” *Harvard Theological Review* 25 (1932) 29–46

<sup>7</sup> Hewitt, 29. While it is true that to base one’s knowledge on the ever changing products of the artist’s world is not sound; it is also not sound to argue from absence of evidence. Yet this is precisely Hewitt’s argument; because the sources do not explicitly state that Jesus’ hands and feet were nailed, and because the ancient sources are rather silent as to how one was crucified, Hewitt concludes then that nailing through the feet is improbable. One of the purposes of this present argument is to demonstrate a number of such weaknesses in Hewitt’s work.

<sup>8</sup> Hewitt cites a mere eleven sources, only one of which deals with the use of ropes, and this is clearly noted to be an exception. *Hist. Apost.* iii: “It is stated that the proconsul ordered Andrew to be bound hands and feet with ropes, and that no nails at all be employed, so as to give him a longer period of suffering before he died,” (as quoted in Hewitt, 44).

during the 1950s and the 1960s.<sup>9</sup> Blinzler, taking a moderate position on the issue, said that sometimes ropes were employed and sometimes nails.<sup>10</sup> He did posit though, that when a person lived for multiple days, he was most likely attached to the cross with ropes.<sup>11</sup> Jeremias, seemingly influenced by Hewitt,<sup>12</sup> remarked that crucifixion was a “bloodless punishment,”<sup>13</sup> certainly implying the use of ropes;<sup>14</sup> yet he provides no research to support his position. Winter, strongly following Hewitt, concludes that the feet of the crucified were never nailed—the crucified were usually tied, and nails were used for the hands only minimally.<sup>15</sup>

All of this changed, though, in 1968 with the discovery of a series of ancient tombs located in a suburb of Jerusalem named

<sup>9</sup> Joseph Blinzler, *The Trial of Jesus: The Jewish and Roman Proceedings against Jesus*, trans. Isabel and Florence McHugh (Westminister, Maryland: Newman, 1959), 250–264; Jeremias, 223; Winter, 95–97; cf. Zias and Sekeles 1985, 26; and Brown, 949, for continued use of Hewitt; these are in regards to Hewitt's supposition that tying was used in Egypt.

<sup>10</sup> Blinzler, 264, possibly noting the limitations of Hewitt, states: “Another question not fully cleared up concerns the method of attaching the condemned to the cross.” Though he notes the problem, he does not offer a solution beyond that already mentioned.

<sup>11</sup> Blinzler, 250.

<sup>12</sup> Hewitt, 37.

<sup>13</sup> Jeremias, 223.

<sup>14</sup> Certainly Hengel, 31; and Joseph Zias, “Crucifixion in Antiquity,” *The Jewish Roman World of Jesus*, ed. James D. Tabor, 11 February 1999, <<http://www.uncc.edu/jdtabor/crucifixion.html>> (2 February 2002), (hereafter cited as Zias 1999) see his position as such. This view of crucifixion as being bloodless and thus the implication of tying is stated more forcefully by Brandenburger, 18.

<sup>15</sup> It is helpful to understand that almost all research and writings on crucifixion center in one way or another around the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. As such there are often biases present that affect the research. In the case of Winter, he seeks to minimize the historicity of the Gospel accounts, thus tying and no minimal nails strengthen his position. In like manner, Jeremias' section on crucifixion seeks to show Christ as a sacrificial lamb, his point on the bloodlessness of the punishment helps his argument that the account reflects symbolic language more than history.

Giv'at Ha-Mivtar.<sup>16</sup> There in the arid climate of Israel, N. Haas discovered the remains of one Jehohanan, who, among other peculiarities, was found to have his lower leg bones not only shattered near the proximal end but also transfixed by a large iron spike near the distal end. It was immediately hypothesized, and is now very well accepted by scholars, that this find at last presented archeological proof of crucifixion. Haas's conclusions relative to this evidence are as follows: (1) the nail, which was bent, had pierced both of Jehohanan's calcanean (leg bones);<sup>17</sup> (2) a scratch on the right radius showed where a nail had passed close to the bone, indicating that Jehohanan had been nailed through all four limbs; (3) the shattered and broken leg bones were indicative of crurifragium (the breaking of the leg bones mentioned in the gospels and elsewhere); (4) a wooden plaque, found by the head of the nail, had helped secure his feet; and (5) wood fragments at the tip of the nail demonstrated that the upright of Jehohanan's cross was made of olive wood. There were a number of concerns expressed by Haas with the results concluded from this discovery.<sup>18</sup> Because of pressure from certain religious groups to inter the bones within a matter of weeks, very few of the bones could be studied at length. After they were preserved, there was only a short time in which to conduct the study because of the fragile nature of the bones and the time it took to properly preserve them.

Based on this new archaeological evidence from Israel, debates ensued in the academic world concerning how one was attached

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<sup>16</sup> N. Haas, "Anthropological Observations on the Skeletal Remains from Giv'at ha-Mivtar," *Israel Exploration Journal* 20 (1970): 38–59.

<sup>17</sup> Almost all scholars agree that the nail bent as a result of hitting a knot in the stipes (the upright portion of the cross): see Haas, 58; Charlesworth, 149; Zias and Sekeles 1985, 27; Zias and Charlesworth, 283.

Two dissenting views are Y. Yadin, "Epigraphy and Crucifixion," *Israel Exploration Journal* 23 (1973): 20–22; and Vilhelm Møller-Christensen, "Skeletal Remains from Giv'at ha-Mivtar," *Israel Exploration Journal* 26 (1976): 36–37; both believe that the nail was intentionally bent.

<sup>18</sup> Haas, 49–51, 57.

to the cross.<sup>19</sup> In 1972, Charlesworth noted that this discovery of Jehohanan curtailed Hewitt's conclusion concerning nails and feet.<sup>20</sup> The following year, Yigael Yadin observed that the length of the nail was shorter than what had been originally reported.<sup>21</sup> He also hypothesized that olive wood would never be used for the stipes of a cross. He proposed, based on these findings, that the feet were nailed together, and the tip intentionally bent. Jehohanan's legs would then form a kind of lasso that would go over the top of the cross, leaving the victim hanging head downward. His theory never gained wide acceptance. The following decade brought a variety of hypotheses concerning how Jehohanan, and the crucified in general, were attached to the cross. In addition to these came numerous criticisms of Haas's findings.

In 1985, Zias and Sekeles re-examined the skeleton of Jehohanan in an attempt to resolve the confusion.<sup>22</sup> Their findings differed considerably from Haas. Commending him for his work they noted the following irregularities in his conclusions:

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<sup>19</sup> Along with Haas's, two other reports concerning the tombs were published: J. Naveh, "The Ossuary Inscriptions from Giv'at Ha-Mivtar," *Israel Exploration Journal* 20 (1970): 33–37; V. Tzaferis, "Jewish Tombs at or near Giv'at ha-Mivtar, Jerusalem," *Israel Exploration Journal* 20 (1970): 18–32. Subsequent articles concerning this discovery were published in 1973 by Charlesworth, 147–150; Yadin, 18–22; in 1976 Møller-Christensen, 35–38; in 1979 Heinz-Wolfgang Kuhn, "Der Gekreuzigte von Giv'at ha-Mivtar," in *Theologia Crucis, Signum Crucis: Festschrift für Erich Dinkler zum 70. Geburtstag*, ed. Carl Andresen and Günter Klein (Tübingen: Mohr, 1979), 303–334.; in 1985 Zias and Sekeles 1985, 22–27; in 1992 Joseph Zias and J. H. Charlesworth, "Crucifixion: Archaeology, Jesus, and the Dead Sea Scrolls," in *Jesus and the Dead Sea Scrolls*, ed. J. H. Charlesworth (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 273–89.; and in 1999 Zias, to name a few.

<sup>20</sup> Charlesworth, 148–49.

<sup>21</sup> Yadin, 21.

<sup>22</sup> Zias and Sekeles 1985, 22–27. Speaking of their project and describing what they would be examining in their re-evaluation Zias and Sekeles note: "Prior to reburial [1970] the present authors were permitted to study the material after its reconstruction by Professor Haas, which together with the original photographs, casts and radiographs constituted the basis of the following reevaluation" (Zias and Sekeles 1985, 22).

(1) only one bone, not two as originally thought, was pierced by the iron nail; (2) the nail measured only 11.5 cm in total length, not the original 18 cm (12 cm after the bend) as initially indicated; (3) the mark on the wrist was not a conclusive nail mark, rather it was a scratch like “many non-traumatic scratches and indentations . . . found on ancient skeletal material;” (4) they demonstrated that olive could possibly be used for a stipes, noting that the trunk of an olive tree can reach a height of two to three meters; and (5) the breaks in the lower leg bones were not the result *crurifragium* but occurred after burial.<sup>23</sup>

Zias and Sekeles then made a final conclusion that bears strongly on the present discussion. Because they discovered no traumatic marks on Jehohanan’s upper limbs and noting the statement by Josephus that during the siege of Jerusalem the Roman legions traveled up to ten miles to secure wood, Zias and Sekeles concluded with Hewitt that “there is ample literary and artistic evidence for the use of ropes rather than nails to secure the condemned to the cross.”<sup>24</sup>

Three subsequent papers since 1985 must be mentioned to complete this review. In 1989, Fredrick. Zugibe conducted a number of experiments to determine if a crucified person truly

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<sup>23</sup> While their findings have been extremely helpful in clarifying a number of issues, it would be wise to note that there are limitations to their manner of re-evaluation. For example, Haas in his findings, noted that the mark on the right radius was of the sort that is “produced on fresh bone” (Haas, 58). Zias and Sekeles, speaking from memories and photographs some 15 years old state that the mark which Haas described was no different from “two similar non-traumatic indentations . . . on the right fibula,” the only bone that they were actually able to observe and analyze (Zias and Sekeles 1985, 24). In this case I side with Haas who had both sets of bones and was in a much more able position to judge such pieces of evidence.

<sup>24</sup> Zias and Sekeles 1985, 26. As noted earlier, surely Haas witness has greater strength in this point, being the primary witness than Zias and Sekeles who were working from memories and pictures. Also I will argue against the lack of wood being evidence for ropes. It ought to be noted that Hewitt himself observed that artistic representations in no way reflected historical reality (See Hewitt’s discussion (33–37), and his conclusion (44)).



died from asphyxiation, this being the prevailing view for the past fifty years, and to see if nails through the hands would hold the weight of the body.<sup>25</sup> His experiments ably demonstrated that when a person was crucified with the arms at a 60–70 degree angle there was no threat of asphyxiation. The experiments he conducted on cadavers also established that there are three places in the hand and one in the wrist that would satisfactorily hold the weight of the crucified.<sup>26</sup>

Then in 1992, Zias and Charlesworth published a study which, in part, reviewed Zugibe's findings, the Jehohanan case, and the impact on our understanding of how one is attached to the cross because of these discoveries. Of Zugibe they note that while his findings are "probably medically accurate," there are limitations to them, namely that his conclusions on asphyxiation can only be applicable to those crucified with their arms stretched out on a cross.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> F. T. Zugibe, "Two Questions about Crucifixion: Does the Victim Die of Asphyxiation? Would Nails in the Hands Hold the Weight of the Body?" *Bible Review* 5 (1989): 34–43.

<sup>26</sup> Zugibe, 37, 42. The original theory of asphyxiation became popular after Dr. Barbet brought to light two experiments (the first conducted in WWI and the second in WWII, both by the Germans), where victims were attached to a beam with their hands straight up over their heads. It was found that if weights were attached to their feet the victim expired within ten minutes; without the weights he would die within forty-five minutes. Though Barbet's conclusions are valid only if the crucified's hands were attached directly overhead to the stipes itself, the theory of death by asphyxiation has become so widespread that almost every author thus far mentioned states this as the usual cause of death. Dr. Zugibe therefore conducted experiments under careful medical observation where men and women were attached to a crossbeam with their arms at a 60–70 degree angle from 5–45 minutes. Though almost all persons experienced heightened blood pressure and heart rate, not a single one had the least degree of breathing difficulty (except for a few cases of initial hyperventilation). Zugibe's experiment demonstrates distinctly that asphyxiation was not the usual cause of death. This then brings into question the purpose of the sedile (a small outcrop from the cross that the crucified would sit on). In times past it was conjectured that the sedile would stop a person from asphyxiating; this will be discussed later. In regards to how the crucified most often died, Zugibe concludes that death was most often by shock (40–41).

Referring to Jehohanan and the question of how victims were attached to a cross, Zias and Charlesworth rightly state that “one’s assessment . . . must not be limited to skeletal remains. One must take into account the literary sources from the Roman period.”<sup>28</sup> They reason that based on the lack of archeological evidence of nails; the lack of injury on the forearms of Jehohanan (the positioning of Zias and Sekeles), and the “ample literary . . . evidence for the use of ropes”; they conclude that ropes were the method employed for attaching Jehohanan’s arms to the cross.

Lastly Zias addressed the issue in 1999 of how one was crucified. He looked at three issues: 1) whether women were crucified—to note if gender altered the method of attachment, 2) the absence of nails in archeological finds, and 3) the relationship between ropes and nails in crucifixion. He concluded that women were probably crucified, citing two Mishnaic sources and the common knowledge that it was a slave’s punishment.<sup>29</sup> He also theorized that ropes would have been used for mass crucifixions and nails for small groups or individuals—like Jehohanan. He explains the archeological absence of nails was due to their quality as highly coveted magical items.<sup>30</sup>

So, while the question of how a body was attached to a cross in antiquity has been frequently debated and discussed, there is still a wide range of views concerning ropes and nails. While Hewitt ably discussed the problem, he did not successfully close the discussion; this was in part because he did not sufficiently re-

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<sup>27</sup> Zias and Charlesworth 1992, 282. This question will also be addressed later.

<sup>28</sup> Zias and Charlesworth 1992, 282. While they state this, they do not follow their own advice as far as one might hope. Rather, they mention a few sources, but conduct no new research on the subject.

<sup>29</sup> *Tractate Mourning* 2.11 possibly shows women also being crucified in Alexandria in A.D. 37–41; *Sanh.* 6.5 in which Simeon B. Shetah had 80 women accused of sorcery crucified.

<sup>30</sup> *Shabbath* 6.10; Zias 1999, 4.

view and analyze the textual sources. The discussions on Jehohanan have also brought much to light. Yet even at present, I have not been able to discover a study that adequately covers the topic of how a body was attached to a cross in antiquity.

### Historical Background

It would be helpful to this discussion to overview briefly the history and purpose of crucifixion. Crucifixion was preceded by impaling for almost 1,500 years. Impaling goes back at least as far as the early second millennium B.C., where under Hammurabi women who had colluded in the death of their husband with other men would be so punished.<sup>31</sup> The Assyrians (distant successors to Hammurabi and Old Babylon), as well as other Near Eastern cultures, continued the practice of impaling down through the seventh century B.C., especially as a punishment for rebellious peoples.<sup>32</sup> The Persians, who dominated the ancient Near East from the sixth to fourth centuries B.C. seem to have acquired impaling from the Assyrians and are the people with whom impaling is often associated;<sup>33</sup> In conjunction with the practice of impaling somewhere during the Persian period the earliest manifestations of crucifixion appear.<sup>34</sup> There is some confusion as to the exact time that crucifixion was first employed, both because it is not often specifically detailed in any ancient

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<sup>31</sup> James Bennett Pritchard, "Law Code of Hammurabi," No. 153, in *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, 3d ed. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1969), 172 (hereafter cited as *ANET*).

<sup>32</sup> "Ashurbanipal on the Rassam Cylinder," *ANET*, 295.

<sup>33</sup> Herodotus 1.128.2; 3.125.3; 3.132.2; 3.159.1

<sup>34</sup> It is from this time that we have Herodotus 9.120 mentions that the Russian king Xerxes "nailed [Artayctes] to boards and hanged him aloft." The Greeks of the seventh century B.C. till at least the time of Philip practiced a punishment called apotympanismos which involved the binding of criminals and such to boards with "cramp irons" until they expired (Barkan, 63–72). Such an example is seen in the seventeen skeletal remains found in Athens in which iron rings were found around their neck, arms, and legs.

record and because the very words that meant “stake,” σταυρός and στόλοψ, were also used for “cross.” This will be discussed in greater detail later. From the Persians it went to the Greeks and other Near Eastern peoples—like the Jews<sup>35</sup>—while the Phoenicians transmitted it to the Carthaginians and the Carthaginians to the Romans.<sup>36</sup>

Crucifixion had many purposes in the ancient world. For some of the more nomadic peoples like the Scythians and Britons, impaling/crucifying had extensive religious significance.<sup>37</sup> For others, such as the Assyrians, Persians, and Macedonians it was utilized to make an example of rebellious peoples.<sup>38</sup> For the

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<sup>35</sup>Josephus *Ant.* 12.256 (Syrians crucifying Jews); 13.380–3: The Hasmonean king, Alexander Janneus, crucified some 800 Pharisees. That this was not just a random case, though possibly demonstrative of the Greek hellinizing influence, recorded in the laws of the Essenes are three instances where they are commanded to crucify, 11QTemple 64:6–13, as well as a clear example of this in one of their biblical commentaries, 4QpNahum 3–4; 7–9.

<sup>36</sup>The passing of crucifixion to the Romans most likely occurred during the Punic Wars. Some indication of this comes from Livy; in 22.13.9 he speaks of Carthaginians crucifying and then shortly thereafter in 22.33.2 (217 B.C.) he has the Romans using it on a band of twenty-five rebellious slaves. It is possible that they acquired it sometime earlier, probably again from the Carthaginians, owing to their frequent contact. Such a concept would come from the frequent use of crucifixion by Plautus's plays (254–186 B.C.) which indicate the practice had been used widely and for generations. For general overviews of crucifixion please see D. J. Burke, “Cross; Crucify,” in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, 1979; Gerald G. O'Collins, “Crucifixion,” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 1992.

<sup>37</sup>Hdt. 4.71–2: a Scythian ritual of surrounding the dead king's funeral bier with fifty impaled horses and fifty impaled men; *Dio Cassius* 62.7.2.: The Britons having captured many of the noblest of Roman women tortured them terribly and then “impaled the women on sharp skewers run lengthwise through the entire body. All this they did to the accompaniment of sacrifices, banquets and wanton behavior, not only in their other sacred places, but particularly in the grove of Andate.”

<sup>38</sup>Hdt. 3.159.1: Darius having captured rebellious Babylon “impaled about three thousand men that were chief among them;” Arr. *Anab.* 6.17.2: Alexander

Carthaginians, in addition to its deterrent effects, it was used as a method of motivating their generals. There are numerous examples of Carthaginian generals being crucified for making poor decisions in battle.<sup>39</sup> In contrast, crucifixion in the Roman Empire was used almost exclusively on slaves and rebels. The overwhelming purpose of crucifixion in the Roman empire was to maintain law and order, often by intimidating and humiliating subject peoples. As previously noted, the vast majority of Roman crucifixions resulted from rebellion or sedition. In fact, the Romans felt that more than punishing the criminals who were crucified, the practice had a greater affect as a deterrent upon further crime and disorder.<sup>40</sup> Crucifixion then was made to be the most heinous and awful of punishments, and everything possible was done to make it appear as such. Thus we have reports not only of people simply being attached to the cross, but also of crucifixions in horrific postures, private parts being impaled, and bodies being left on crosses to be ravaged by both bird and beast.<sup>41</sup> The use of nails, with their awful piercing, the attendant bleeding and nerve shattering pain, fits within this context more than does

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having beaten Musicanus, “Alexander ordered him to be hanged (κρεμάσαι) in his own land, together with the Brahmans who had been the instigators of the revolt.”

<sup>39</sup> Polyb. 1.11.5; 1.24.6; 1.86.4.

<sup>40</sup> Tac. *Ann.* 15.44.3: In speaking of the Christian crucifixions carried out under Nero, Tacitus states that “in spite of a guilt which had earned the most exemplary punishment, there arose a sentiment of pity, due to the impression that they were being sacrificed not for the welfare of the state but to the ferocity of a single man.”

<sup>41</sup> Sen. *Dial.* 6 (*Cons. ad Marciam* 20.3): “I see cruces . . . some hang their victims with head toward the ground, some impale their private parts, others stretch out their arms on a fork-shaped patibulo;” Joseph. *BJ* 5.449–51: 500 persons a day were crucified, being nailed “in different postures;” Tac. *Ann.* 15.44.3: speaking again of the Christians, Tacitus says that “they were covered with wild beasts’ skins and torn to death by dogs; or they were *crucibus adfixi*, and, when daylight failed were burned to serve as lamps by night;” Eusebius *Historia Ecclesia* 8.8 says that some people were crucified in the usual manner of malefactors, while others were hung upside-down.

the use of ropes. While ropes might be used to draw out the life of the crucified and increase an individual's suffering, nails, being more horrific, would seem to accomplish the overall goal more effectively.

In addition to the historical transmission of the practice of crucifixion from one people to another, there was also a transformation in the shape of the cross. Originally, the instrument employed was a simple pole or spike (thus the Greek term σταυρός), to which one was attached. Later, the cross took the shape of the letter Tau (T)<sup>42</sup> or the traditional cross. Some conjecture that the common practice in Rome of binding the arms of a slave to a yoke-like instrument called a *patibulum*,<sup>43</sup> led to the addition of the crossbeam to the stipes.<sup>44</sup>

### Limitations

One of the most obvious limitations to any study of crucifixion based on ancient sources is the general way that most crucifixions are described in antiquity. Of some 275 accounts researched, 223 use only general verbs or phrases such as *in crucem*

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<sup>42</sup> Lucian *Iud. voc.* 12.

<sup>43</sup> This punishment involved a person having his arms bound to a piece of wood like a yoke and then being driven and beaten through the streets of a town. Such a punishment would humiliate the person, and serve as an example to others. In crucifixion, the crossbeam, called a *patibulum*, was carried by the victim to his cross, where he was stripped, whipped, and then affixed to the cross. Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 7.69.2: A Roman citizen ordered one of his slaves to be punished by his fellow-slaves. And so they "having stretched out both his arms and fastened them to a piece of wood which extended across his breast and shoulders as far as his wrists, followed him, tearing his naked body with whips." A good example of the carrying of a *patibulum* combined with crucifixion is seen in the gospel accounts: Matt 27:32; Mark 15:21; Luke 23:26.

<sup>44</sup> Definitely by the first century A.D., the crosspiece appears to have been a common part of the cross. Sen. *Dial.* 6 (*Cons. ad Marciam* 20.3); Epictetus, *Diatribes* 3.26.22; Min. Fel. *Oct.* 9.4. See also Burke, 826.

*suffere*<sup>45</sup> (to be raised on a cross), *in cruce[m] tolli*<sup>46</sup> (to be lifted up on a cross), σταυρόω (to crucify, to impale), and σκολοπιζώ (to crucify, to impale) without ever mentioning the actual details of the method of attachment. Even when the sources do mention the method of attachment, there can often be ambiguity due to the multiple meanings of the words used.<sup>47</sup> Absolute clarity is only had when relatively rarely used words like *clavus* (nail), *alligo* (to tie; to secure with rope), or προσηλώω (to nail, rivet; to nail up) are employed. Yet, as shall be seen later, there are a number of words that, while not so definitive in their meaning as those just mentioned, do strongly lend themselves to a sure interpretation.<sup>48</sup>

Another problem, alluded to earlier, is that there is no distinct historical point at which crucifixion replaces impaling.<sup>49</sup> In fact, there is strong evidence that both were being practiced through and past the second century A.D, though the majority of scholars favor crucifixion as the more common of the two in the Roman Period.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>45</sup> Livy 30.43.13

<sup>46</sup> Livy 38.48.12–13

<sup>47</sup> For instance, Plutarch, *Vit. Cleom.* 38–9 relates how Ptolemy slew the king of Sparta, flayed, and then hanged/impaled him. In 38, he says he κρεμά (hang) καταβυρωσαντας him, and in 39 ἀνεσταυρώμενον (crucify/impale). Seneca, *Epistulae Morales*, 14.5: “The cross (*cruces*). . . and the stake (*stipitem*) which they drive straight through a man until it protrudes from his throat.” One clear example of impaling in Persian times is related by Plutarch in *Artax.* 17.5 concerning a woman's punishing a eunuch. He says that she, “ordered to flay him alive, to set up his body slantwise on three σταυρῶν and to nail his skin to a fourth.”

<sup>48</sup> The majority of words like these lean toward nailings, as shall be seen. The major philological problem with many words used, even with words that are more specific than in *cruce[m]*, is that they simply mean to “fix” or “secure,” neither lending themselves toward tying or nailing.

<sup>49</sup> Hdt. 7.194 gives us an example that must refer to crucifixion in the time of Xerxes, and one that most likely involved tying, though this is not definitive. It is the story of one Sandoces who was ἀνασταύρωσε and yet because of his good service to Darius he was latter taken down.

<sup>50</sup> Plutarch *Moralia* 499D speaking of vice causing unhappiness states: “But you will nail him to a cross or impale him on a stake;” Tert. Apol. 12.3: “You hang Christians on crosses and stakes (*crucibus et stipitibus*).

A third and final limitation deals with the sources themselves. Each source has its own biases and motives, so every historical reference (including myths, medical treatises, etc.) that is found must be treated as fully as possible. In addition to historical sources, there are numerous fictional and “romance” novels that speak of crucifixion, often with the hero about to be crucified only to be saved at the last moment. Only one or two of these sort will be analyzed because, though they speak in greater detail about crucifixion, it is almost impossible to assess their accuracy. Finally, there are the writings of the early Christian church fathers.<sup>51</sup> I have included only the church fathers who were alive while crucifixions still took place (thus none after Constantine). The Church fathers had the particular bias of needing to justify Jesus’ crucifixion in a world that looked on such a punishment with disgust and horror. While biased, their detailed accounts of crucifixion often from executioner accounts must still be considered to gain an understanding of crucifixion at large and in the particular. Though manifold limitations do exist, there is still much that can be garnished from each record with careful, diligent study.

### Early Misunderstandings

Past research has perpetuated a few misconceptions concerning the use of ropes in crucifixion. One of these is confusing the ancient Roman practice of *arbor infelix* with crucifixion.<sup>52</sup> *Arbor infelix* involved the “bind[ing of one] with a rope to the barren tree” (*infelici arbori reste suspendito*) and then scourging/beating him to death.<sup>53</sup> By 50 B.C. Cicero, in an elegant, prepared speech,

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<sup>51</sup> I have looked mainly at Ignatius, Tertullian, Justin, the Gospel of Peter, and Eusebius.

<sup>52</sup> Thus Hewitt, 41, uses this in part as the basis for his argument on ropes being used; cf. Brown, in his otherwise masterful work, *The Death of the Messiah* seems to use this passage in a similar way (949).

<sup>53</sup> Livy 1.26.6; also Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 2.10.3; Cic. *Rab. Post.* 13–16; see Hengel, 39–45 for an excellent discussion of *arbor infelix*.



clearly states that the ancient practice of *arbor infelix* had “long since disappeared.”<sup>54</sup> Suetonius, in *Claudius* and in *Nero*, reiterates that the practice of *arbor infelix* was not current during the first century (the time when both the majority of nailings are attested to [as will be shown] and the crucifixions of Jesus and Jehohanan transpired). In expounding the emperor’s cruelty, Suetonius writes in his book on *Claudius*: “When he was at Tibur and wished to see an execution in the ancient fashion, no executioner could be found after the criminals were bound to the stake (*deligatis ad palum*).”<sup>55</sup> As to what this ancient fashion was, Suetonius states of *Nero*:

Nero . . . read that he had been pronounced a public enemy by the senate, and that they were seeking him to punish him in the ancient fashion and he asked what manner of punishment that was. When he learned that the criminal was stripped, fastened by the neck in a fork and then beaten to death with rods he committed suicide.<sup>56</sup>

Yet *Nero* was familiar with crucifixion as *Tacitus* asserts that he had many Christians “fastened on crosses (*crucibus adfixi*).”<sup>57</sup>

Besides the confusion between *arbor infelix* and crucifixion there also appears to be some question about a statement that *Hewitt* made that has been subsequently carried through to the arguments of *Zias* and *Sekeles*, and *Zias* and *Charlesworth*.<sup>58</sup> *Hewitt* stated that crucifixion started in *Egypt* and that “the *Egyptians* did not nail their victims, they tied them.”<sup>59</sup> He quotes

<sup>54</sup> *Cic. Rab. Post.*, 13.

<sup>55</sup> *Suetonius Claud.* 34.1.

<sup>56</sup> *Suet. Ner.* 49.2.

<sup>57</sup> *Tac. Ann.* 15.44.3. *Nero* who was familiar with crucifixion, and many other awful forms of torture, did not know the details of *arbor infelix*. Thus at the time when nailings are most attested to the strongest link that some have to the practice of tying, *arbor infelix*, was long since, it would seem, out of practice.

<sup>58</sup> *Zias* and *Sekeles* 1985, 26; *Zias* and *Charlesworth* 1992, 283.

<sup>59</sup> *Hewitt*, 40.

no sources for either of these assertions, and neither of the two studies co-authored by Zias cited anyone but Hewitt as a source.<sup>60</sup> That Hewitt asserts crucifixion as having originated in Egypt, I can only think that he is referring to a situation mentioned in Josephus where the author states that Pharaoh had his baker, from the famous Joseph story of the Bible, ἐσταυρωθήσαν.<sup>61</sup>

As to Hewitt's theory that the Egyptians used only ropes for crucifixion in Egypt, the lone source I could find was the fictional "romantic" novel of Xenophon of Ephesus (circa A.D. 160 and long after crucifixion had become prevalent throughout the Mediterranean). The hero Habrocomes was sentenced to death by crucifixion. Near the Nile "they set up their cross and attached him to it, making his hands and feet fast with ropes; for such was the procedure in crucifixion among the people of that region."<sup>62</sup> If this is the source that Hewitt utilizes, there is much to be desired. A surer source both in regards to historicity and reliability is Philo of Alexandria (20 B.C.–A.D. 50), who lived in Egypt. Speaking of the inane of the human intellect he states: "Thus the mind

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<sup>60</sup> Zias and Sekeles 1985, 26: "Moreover, in Egypt, where according to one source crucifixion originated, the victim was not nailed but tied." Zias and Charlesworth 1992, 283: "In Egypt, where according to one source crucifixion originated, the victim was not nailed but tied." The source that both of these articles refer to is Hewitt. Brown (949) also relies solely on Hewitt for this data.

<sup>61</sup> Joseph. *Ant.* 2.77; Gen. 40:19–22. I can find no other work that agrees with Hewitt. Friedrich, 573, believes that it originated in Persia, as does O'Collins, 1207. Burke, 825–6, implies that crucifixion's antecedent was the Assyrian practice of impalement, while Harry Thurston Peck, ed., "Crux," in *Harper's Dictionary of Classical Literature and Antiquities*, 1937, states that there is some doubt that the Persian form of crucifixion were practiced by the Romans. He feels that it was more the Carthaginians and Romans who practiced the form we are familiar with. The only other rationale that I can think of for his statement is that the Israelites, as they exited Egypt, were given the Law which included Deuteronomy 21:20–23 injunction of hanging corpses of certain criminals on trees, yet this by no means shows the practice of crucifixion as having started in Egypt, especially where many scholars place the writing of Deuteronomy around the seventh century B.C. at the time of King Josiah.

<sup>62</sup> Xenophon, *An Ephesian Tale*, 4.2.1 (Hadas, 106).

stripped of the creations of its art will be found as it were a headless corpse, with severed neck nailed (προσηλώμενος) like the crucified (ἀνασκολοπίσθεντες) to the tree of helpless and poverty-stricken indiscipline.” In another treatise, speaking of the body and soul of one who loves their body, Philo states that the two are joined together “like men crucified and nailed to a tree.”<sup>63</sup> Philo, for his arguments to be efficacious, must be stating a practice that not only he had seen but was at least familiar also to his contemporaries. At least in the first century A.D. nailing was a method of affixing persons to the cross in Egypt. An interpretation of Xenophon, if we accept any historicity in his fictional writing, should not be considered the norm for all of Egypt any more than Philo, given the scarcity of sources from that location.

### Nails vs Ropes

As has been noted, a number of studies have either indicated that ropes were the predominate way of attachment or that they were used as often as nails.<sup>64</sup> A thorough study of ancient sources does not seem to confirm their assessment. The most direct way of discovering this is to review the actual words used to connote nailing and tying. For nailing the words used are *clavus*, *figo*, *affigo/adfigo*, *offigo*, *suffigo*, *antefigo*, and καθηλώω/προσηλώω; for tying *spartum*, *alligo*, sometimes προσδέω, and κρεμάννυμι.

The word *clavus* means “nail,”<sup>65</sup> and it or its counterpart in other languages is attested to seven times.<sup>66</sup> Lucan tells us in a fanciful tale of Erithco who “purloins the nails (*insertum manibus*)

<sup>63</sup> Philo, *De somniis*, 2.212ff; Post. 61–62.

<sup>64</sup> See Hewitt, 37, 42; Winter, 95; Jeremias, 223; for a middle view see Zias and Sekeles 1985, 26; Zias and Charlesworth 1992, 282; Brown, 949.

<sup>65</sup> *Oxford Latin Dictionary* (hereafter cited as OLD), 335.

<sup>66</sup> Luc. 543–47; Sen. De vita. 19.3, metaphorically of driving in ones own nails; Plin. HN 28.46; G. of Pet. 6:2, drawing the nails from Christ's hands (Greek); *Shabbath* 67a, spikes from crucified bodies as amulets (Hebrew); Apul. Met. 3.17, spikes from crucified bodies as amulets; Apuleius, *Metamorphoses*, 4.10.

that pierced the hands.” Pliny speaks of possible uses of these nails when he says that they can cure neck ailments. While in Apuleius’s tale *Metamorphoses*, the story is told of the bitter Chryserosthis who in revenge against a robber chieftain “crept up and suddenly with a mighty blow nailed our leader’s hand to the panel of the door with a large spike (*grandique clavo*). . . . Leaving him fatally ensnared as it were on the cross.”<sup>67</sup>

The root of all Latin verbs used to describe nailing is *figo*.<sup>68</sup> *Figo* occurs three times, none with cause to doubt nailing. It occurs once as a curse found in a graffito: *in cruce figarus*, “may you be nailed to the cross.”<sup>69</sup> It is also used to describe a strange practice described by Pliny of a tyrant whose workers killed themselves rather than slave for him in his mines. As a means of stopping this he crucified their bodies and refused them burial. The last case is from Suetonius describing Domitian’s cruel ways.<sup>70</sup>

The most common form of *figo* is *affigo/adfigo*. Its meanings all point toward nailing.<sup>71</sup> It occurs seventeen times with only one of these a possible exception to the meaning of nailing.<sup>72</sup> In Sallust there is a fragment of a text discussing pirates that states that the most notorious were “either hung from the mast and flogged or

<sup>67</sup> Apuleius, *Metamorphoses*, 4.10

<sup>68</sup> OLD, 699–70: “To drive in, to fix in, insert (nails, stakes, etc), to drive in a nail;” “to transfix, pierce, run through;” “to fasten up, fix, nail;” “to fasten, secure, nail;” and five definitions meaning planting, implanting, or making rigid. Please note that the meaning of *figo* can also be “to pierce,” and in some cases derivatives of *figo* are better translated as “to impale” rather than “to nail.” When this occurs it will be noted. Also, there are many examples of derivatives of *figo* clearly meaning “to nail.” For example Tac. *Ann.* 1.61.4 uses *antefigo* of Germans who have nailed the heads of Romans to trees.

<sup>69</sup> *CIL IV*, 2082, as quoted and translated in Hengel, 37.

<sup>70</sup> Pliny, *HN* 36.107; Suetonius, *Dom.* 10.1.

<sup>71</sup> OLD, 79: “To fix by piercing, fasten, nail, or pin (to); to hang up; to crucify; to stick or fix (into or onto);” “to transfix or pierce;” and then four other meanings implying attaching (as of organs), restricting, or devoting.

<sup>72</sup> Sallusti Crispi, *Historiae Augustae*. fr. 3.9, pirates fastened high upon a mast; Livy 28.37.2, Carthaginian general crucified; Livy 33.36.3, slave leaders in a revolt; Val. Max.

fastened high up on a [patibulo] without being tortured first (*In quis notissimus quisque aut malo dependens verberabatur aut immutilato corpore improbe patibalu eminens affigebatur*).<sup>73</sup> Hengel concludes that this is to prolong their suffering, from which one might presume that they were bound. There are scholars though who have stated that the method of being bound would not effect the rapidity of expiration.<sup>74</sup>

One of the surest attestations of this word is found in an account by Suetonius describing the time Galba served as a governor of an African province. Suetonius first tells us that he was over-severe, “For he cut off the hands of a money-lender who carried on his business dishonestly and nailed (*adfixit*) them to his counter.” He also realizes that Galba “crucified (*cruce adfecit*) a man for poisoning his ward.” Not only is *adfigo* the word that appears most often in conjunction with nailing, but also it is used in relation to the greatest variety of people (Macedonians, Romans, Germans, and Carthaginians) and the greatest span of time (from c. 100 B.C. to A.D. 330).

Another derivative of *figo* is *offigo*<sup>75</sup> This verb occurs twice, both in the writings of Plautus. In one of his off-color stories, Plautus tells of a slave who offers a financial reward to anyone willing to be crucified for him. But to be sure that they are secured to the cross, he says, “I’ll give a talent to that man who shall be the first to run to the cross for me; but on condition that twice his

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6.9.15, Caesar crucifies pirates; Val. Max. 9.2.3; Petro. *Sat.* 111–112 x2; Curt. 4.4.17, Alexander crucifies 2000; Curt. 6.3.14, Alex desires to crucify a leader; Curt. 7.5.40, Alexander crucifies Bessus; Curt 7.11.28, Alex crucifies Ariamazes; Tac. Ann. 4.72.3, Germans, tired of outrageous Roman taxes, crucify Roman soldiers; Tac. Ann. 15.44.3; Tac. *Hist.* 4.3.2; Suet. *Dom.* 11; Suet. *Galb.* 9; Apul. *Met.* 3.9, a murder is to be crucified; SHA *Avid. Cass.* 4.6, he crucifies arrogant centurions; SHA *Tyr. Trig.* 29.4, the angry people crucify Celsus in effigy.

<sup>73</sup> Sall. *Hist. fr.* 3.9 in , Sallusti Crispi, *Historiarum Reliquiae*, ed. Bertoldus Maurenbrecher (Stuttgart: B. G. Teubner, 1966), 113, translation by Hengel, 41.

<sup>74</sup> Zias and Sekeles, 26.

<sup>75</sup> *OLD*, 1244: “to drive in (a stake or sim.);” “to fasten (one thing against another) by nailing or sim.”

feet, twice his arms are fastened there (*ut offigantur bis pedes, bis brachia*.)” The other reference is to one bearing a patibulum through the street and then being nailed to it at the site of crucifixion.<sup>76</sup>

*Suffigo* also derives from *figo*, and while it can mean “to crucify,” the majority of its meanings are vague.<sup>77</sup> Thus while it occurs five times because nothing definitive can be gathered from the meaning, and each instance is vague enough to not lend itself to a sure interpretation—these will not be considered further.<sup>78</sup>

There are two Greek words, both deriving from the same root, that mean “to nail;” these are καθηλώω and προσηλώω.<sup>79</sup> They occur fourteen times,<sup>80</sup> with a possible exception mentioned in Diodorus of an Indian king who threatens her with σταυρῶ προσηλώσειν.<sup>81</sup> This could possibly be “to impale her on a stake,” rather than “nail her on a cross.” But given the anachronistic nature of his writings and his use of a similar phrase in 25.5.2 this is not as likely.

Some of the most well known instances of nailing come from these words. The thousands mentioned by Josephus as being

<sup>76</sup> Plautus. *Most.* 36off.; Plautus. *Car.* fr. 2 (per Hengel, 62).

<sup>77</sup> *OLD*, 1861:It has meanings of: “To fix beneath as a support; to fasten to something lying above;” “to insert (something sharp) below;” to attach to the top of, to fix aloft; to fasten to a cross or other instrument of punishment, to crucify.”

<sup>78</sup> Caesar, *Bellum Africum*, 66, Ceaser crucifying Numidians; Seneca. Ep. 101.14; Suet. Iul. 74.1, pirates crucified by Caesar; Apuleius, *Met.* 6.31; of a girl threatened with crucifixion; Apul. *Met.* 10.12, stepmother exiled, slave crucified.

<sup>79</sup> Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), 1513 (hereafter cited as Liddell and Scott): “to nail, rivet, fix;” “to be fastened by nails;” “nail up.”

<sup>80</sup> Hdt. 9.120, Xanthippus nails Artayctes to planks; Demosthenes, *Against Meidias*. 105; Meid worthy of nailing; Apollod. *Bibl.* 1.7.1; Prometheus nailed to the Caucas mountains; Diodorus Siculus, 2.18.1; Diodorus Siculus, 25.5.2, Matho crucifies Hannibal; Philo *Post.* 61–62, Men souls are nailed to bodies like those crucified; Philo dreams 2.213, analogy of nailed to tree; Joseph. BJ 2.306–08, 2000 by Florus; Joseph. BJ 5.449.51, 1000’s under Titus; Ignatius, *To the Smyrnians*, 1.1, of Christ; Ignatius, *To the Smyrnians*, 1.1, analogy of faith as nailed to the cross; Plutarch, *Moralia*. 499B; Lucian *Prom.* 1–4; Eusebius, *Hist. Ecd.* 8.8.

<sup>81</sup> Diodorus Siculus, 2.18.1.

nailed to crosses in many positions during the siege of Jerusalem; Herodotus uses this word to describe Xanthippus nailing Artayctes to planks near the Hellespont; and Ignatius uses this to describe the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. This root is also used philosophically. As cited above, Philo states that men who love their bodies are like the crucified nailed to a tree, attached securely to a dead thing. In another analogy speaking of the human intellect without creative power is like “a headless corpse, with severed neck nailed like the crucified to the tree of helpless and poverty-stricken indiscipline.” Similarly, Ignatius says that our faith must be as sure as if it were nailed to a cross.<sup>82</sup>

Turning now to a review of words for ropes and tying, one word for rope is *spartum*. Only it and one similar word were found among all 275 sources to give any direct witness for tying. Both of these occur in reference to the ropes of the crucified being used for magical purposes. The first is from Pliny, who besides mentioning nails as a cure for neck ailments also includes *spartum e cruce* “ropes from a cross.” The other is from Lucan, who again speaking of Erithco, says that before “purloining the nails” she must “break with her teeth the fatal noose (*Laqueum nodosque nocentes ore suo rumpit*).”<sup>83</sup>

Besides these two references to tying there is also the word *alligo*<sup>84</sup> It occurs two times, each with an exception that should be noted. The first reference comes from the outraged discourse of Cicero, who in painting a picture of the weakness of Verres, states that he “bound [rebellious slaves] to the stake (*palum alligati*)” only to release them in front of all present.<sup>85</sup> The other occurrence comes from the fictional story of Xenophon’s Ephesus where, as previously quoted, he was “attached to [the cross], making his

<sup>82</sup> Philo, *Post.*, 61–62; Philo *dreams* 2.213; Ignatius, *To the Smyrniens*. 1.1.

<sup>83</sup> Pliny, *Naturalis historia*, 28.46; Lucan, 543–47.

<sup>84</sup> *OLD*, 104: its root is *ligo* and has the meaning of “to tie, bind, fashion;” “to secure with ropes;” and nine other meanings dealing with binding.

<sup>85</sup> Cicero, *In Verrem*, 2.5.10–11.

hands and feet fast with rope,”<sup>86</sup> only to escape and continue his to pursue his “lost love”. Thus both times that an actual tying occurs it is for the lesser purpose of having the crucified released.

There is something of a Greek equivalent to *alligo* which is προσδέω.<sup>87</sup> But while *alligo* definitely means “to tie,” προσδέω is not quite so concrete in meaning. It occurs once, and in this the case of Nero binding boys and girls to crosses/stakes and torturing them.<sup>88</sup> From the context it is not possible to say if the binding was with ropes or nails. One might suppose that it is with rope because then it would be less bloody, yet Nero is torturing them which seems to imply blood. Despite the obtuseness of the situation this case will be considered a tying.

Another verb in Greek that sometimes indicates tying is κρεμάννυμι.<sup>89</sup> This word and its meanings will be discussed and argued later, but it occurs thrice where tying does seem to be the merited translation.<sup>90</sup>

Thus out of 275 sources surveyed 47 texts clearly indicate nailing, while only 7 indicate tying.<sup>91</sup> This data will be further analyzed below, but qualifications should be noted here. First, it is not possible to procure from this data any exact statistical ratio of nailing compared to tying. Obviously there are some 221 sources that are too ambiguous to ascertain whether they refer to tying or nailing, in addition to others not yet surveyed. Second, distinct statistical results cannot be drawn from this data, it is possible, both from the number of attestations of nails and the ubiquitous manner in which nailing is implied, to conclude that nailing was the more frequent and common method of affixing one to the

<sup>86</sup> Xenophon *Ephesiaca* 4.2.1.

<sup>87</sup> Liddell and Scott, 1506: “to bind on or to;” “to attach.”

<sup>88</sup> *Dio Cassius*, 63.13.2

<sup>89</sup> Liddell and Scott, 993: “to hang up;” “to crucify;” “to be hung;” “to suspend.”

<sup>90</sup> Hdt. 7.194; Joseph. *BJ* 7.202; Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesia*, 5.1.41.

<sup>91</sup> Thus, contra Hewitt, 42, who states speaks of “the scanty references for the use of nails” in bolstering his argument against the use of nails in Jesus’ feet.



cross. Third, those authors who state or imply that tying is well attested to in antiquity or that tying is more common than nailing are probably in error.

### Nails in Context

This last section will focus on answering questions brought up by scholars in the first section. The first question to be discussed is whether there was a usual way in which people were crucified.<sup>92</sup> Though both Josephus and Seneca mention that they witnessed people being crucified in many positions,<sup>93</sup> there is some indication that there was a standard way for people to be crucified, that is with their arms outstretched; Seneca himself refers to the crosses with stretched out arms. Eusebius mentions that some Christians were “crucified, some as malefactors *usually* are, and some, even more brutally, were nailed in the opposite manner, head-downwards (emphasis mine).”<sup>94</sup> Seneca, in another passage speaks of crucifixion as one “hav[ing] his limbs stretched out upon the cross.”<sup>95</sup> In John 21:18, Peter is told that he will die with his arms outstretched (ἐκτενεις τὰς χεῖρας). One ancient source who gives some indication of the widespread nature of crucifixion with arms outstretched, speaks of a man receiving a massage as

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<sup>92</sup> Zugibe's analysis of death by asphyxiation relies upon the person being crucified upright with arms outstretched. Zias and Charlesworth 1992, 282, noted that this could not be applied in all cases because of statements found in Josephus and elsewhere. Also Blinzler's assertion that those who lived more than a day most have been tied is brought into question by Zias and Sekeles 1985, 26. There is no way to demonstrate this historically, except that we know that one of the purposes of crucifixion was to make it as painful and drawn out as possible. This being the case, and with the heavy attestation of nails, Blinzler's theory would seem to be questionable.

<sup>93</sup> Joseph., *BJ* 5.451: “The soldiers out of rage and hatred amused themselves by nailing their prisoners in different postures.” Seneca, *Dial. Cons. ad Marc.* 20.3: “some hang their victims with head toward the ground, some impale their private parts, others stretch out their arms on a fork-shaped gibbet.”

<sup>94</sup> Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesia*, 8.8.

<sup>95</sup> Seneca, *Dial. De ira*. 1.2.3.

appearing as one crucified, and in another of the criminal, “outstretched on the infamous stake.”<sup>96</sup> Thus there is some indication that the usual method of crucifixion was with outstretched arms.

Some have questioned the historical accuracy of Jesus being nailed to the cross. An analysis of the recorded instances of nailing in regards to time and place provide some striking data. The earliest recorded nailings take place earlier than the third century B.C., and of these there are seven recorded. In the third century B.C. there are four instances recorded, in the second century B.C. there are three, and again in the first century B.C. there are three recorded. The first century A.D. shows a sharp incline with twenty-one nailings recorded, while the second century records seven, and both the third and fourth century record one instance each; for all practical purposes crucifixion ceased in the mid-fourth century A.D. Again, if one were to look at nailing by place, it will be noted that there are six recorded instances in Greece, two in regard to Carthage, and thirty-nine in regard to Rome (eight in Palestine, two in Egypt, and twenty-nine in Rome and its other provinces). Once more while this says nothing definitive about nailing specifically, it does demonstrate that historically speaking the greatest use of nails, both in time and place, center around the time of Jesus.

Zias in 1999 suggested that perhaps the instances of tying or nailing were dependent upon the numbers crucified.<sup>97</sup> When mass numbers were involved they would be tied in order to save time. One might add that they would also save money, at approximately a third-pound a nail (based on the one found with Jehohanan). In the Spartacan revolt alone, this would have consumed some four tons of iron. This is a very tempting theory, especially when

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<sup>96</sup> *Anthologia Latina* 415.23; Epictetus *Diatribes* 3.26.22; If this is the case then the findings of Zugibe in regards to asphyxiation are very relevant. This argument also is contra Zias, who hypothesizes tying with hands above the head.

<sup>97</sup> Zias 1999.

greater than sixty percent of recorded nailings deal with individuals or small groups of people.

Further, in the case that Zias alludes to, where 6,000 survivors of the Spartan revolt were crucified along Appian's Way, the verb that Appian uses derives from κρεμάννυμι "to hang,"<sup>98</sup> and thus for Zias "to tie." There are three other recorded instances where this verb might also mean "to tie." Herodotus uses κρεμάννυμι of a man once crucified some years back, but Darius had him taken down for his good merit. The story implies that he is functioning well, and so we can imagine that he was tied.<sup>99</sup> Josephus records an occasion where the Romans, in trying to force a city to surrender are about to crucify the town hero.<sup>100</sup> While there is nothing definitive in this case, one could imagine that by tying they might have drawn the melodrama out further. Lastly, Eusebius mentions Blandia as crucified, but when no beast would touch her, she was taken down to receive some other torment at a future date.<sup>101</sup> This also seems to indicate tying.

Yet with greater scrutiny, a few loopholes arise in Zias's theory. First Appian, who tells us of the Spartan revolt, not only uses κρεμάννυμι to speak of crucifixion in that instant, but he employs that verb for every case of crucifixion throughout his whole history.<sup>102</sup> This somewhat negates defining the verb as tying.

<sup>98</sup> App. *B. Civ.*, 1.120; this verb is mentioned thirteen times in conjunction with crucifixion: Hdt. 7.194 (nr-Darius—a man anestauroed, but taken down—not impalement); Diodorus Siculus, 16.35.5 (nr-Philip of Onomarchus); Joseph. *BJ* 7.202 (of fake out); App. *B. Civ.* 1.119 (spart -o-71bc); App. *B. Civ.* 1.120 (6000-a-71BC); App. *B. Civ.* 4.20 (Cicero's head and hand); App. *B. Civ.* 4.29 (slave who betrayed master-o-40'sbc); App. *Mith.* 97 (nr-slaves-o-60'sbc); App. *Mith.* 29 (Nr-Deserters-o-60'sbc); Arr. *Anab.* 6.17.2 (nr-Alex of leaders); Arr. *Anab.* 6.14.4 (nr-Alex of doctor); Lucian *Prom.* 1-4 (total cruc lang—one nailed said to hang there); Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.*, 5.1.41 (a woman hung up, taken down)

<sup>99</sup> Hdt. 7.194. Of course, there is the story of Oedipus in Euripides' *Phoenissae* (26), where we are told that he had an iron spike through both legs in his youth and yet he grew up to be a fully functional adult.

<sup>100</sup> Joseph. *BJ* 7.202-03.

<sup>101</sup> Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesia*, 5.1.41.

<sup>102</sup> App. *B. Civ.* 1.119; App. *B. Civ.* 1.120; App. *B. Civ.* 4.29; App. *Mith.* 29;

Further, Appian uses the same verb to describe the impaling of Cicero's head and hand on the Rostrum;<sup>103</sup> thus Appian might be using this word with a meaning closer to *figo* than *alligo*. Lucian, in describing one nailed, also uses κρεμάννυμι to describe him.<sup>104</sup> The use of the verb κρεμάννυμι should probably not be used to confirm tying.

Besides looking at the linguistics, historical records also seem to negate Zias's theory. Alexander, in his eastward campaign, had 2,000 nailed to crosses after he captured Tyre.<sup>105</sup> Additionally, Josephus records Florus as having nailed some 2,000 Jewish knights in order to control rebellions, and Titus' soldiers nailed thousands of Jews to crosses during the siege of Jerusalem.<sup>106</sup> It would seem then that nailing or tying is not based upon numbers.

Both Zias (1999) and Zias and Charlesworth have conjectured on the lack of archeological evidence of nails. The above findings on nailing are contra the conclusions of Zias and Charlesworth, but building and expanding on the theory of Zias (1999), who stated that the lack of evidence "is best explained by the fact that nails of a victim crucified were among the most powerful medical amulets in antiquity and thus removed from the victim following their death,"<sup>107</sup> I would quote two further sources that demonstrate the wide spread use of the crucified's nails as amulets. Pliny,

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App. Mith. 97. Zias's argument is somewhat weakened also in that three of the five times that this verb is used it refers to acts against a single person and not to large groups. If the verb was used in reference to large groups only, this would have strengthened his argument.

<sup>103</sup> App. *B. Civ.* 4.20. It is also interesting to note that of the five time Appian uses κρεμάννυμι three refer to singular instances and only one to mass crucifixion. Even this then speaks against Zias's theory.

<sup>104</sup> Lucian, *Prom.*, 1–4.

<sup>105</sup> Curtius Rufus 4.4.17

<sup>106</sup> Joseph. *BJ* 2.306–08; Joseph. *BJ* 5.449.51. If anything should speak of the frequency of nailing it should be this. In the middle of a war when supplies were low, the soldiers were nailing Jews up on crosses at the rate of 500 a day, demonstrating that even with scarcity of materials, nailings still occurred.

<sup>107</sup> Zias 1999, 4. Zias references only *Shabbath* 6.10 (wrongly as 6.6).

in the first century A.D., states that the nail from a cross can help neck ailments;<sup>108</sup> while Lucian, in his tale of Erithco the witch, states that she “purloins the nails that pierced the hand,” for magical use.<sup>109</sup>

Yet the use of nails as amulets must be seen as secondary to the economic realities of the time. One has only to reflect on the value of metal, not only in ancient times but even today, to recognize the folly in assuming that nails would have been routinely left in the carcasses of the crucified. Note that in the body of Jehohanan, where two nails had been used to attach him to the stipes, only one nail was found, and that due to an anomaly.<sup>110</sup>

In their reassessment of Jehohanan, Zias and Sekeles report that when the nail was driven in it left traces of rust (i.e. they used a rusty nail to crucify him).<sup>111</sup> We cringe at the thought but such was the reality of the day. Diodorus records a repeat nailing on a cross but not that the nails were necessarily reused.<sup>112</sup> There is also the account in the Gospel of Peter (6:21) of the crucifiers drawing the nails out of Jesus’ hands. One need think only of war-torn Judea when the soldiers were crucifying five hundred a day to recognize the prudence in reusing the nails. It is probably that nails were often reused.

## Conclusions

Over the centuries the crucifixion of Jesus Christ has produced a host of discussions, questions, and studies, including the question of how one is attached to the cross. Certain conclusions, however, can be advocated based on research and ancient sources that recorded crucifixions. First, nailing is much more well at-

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<sup>108</sup> Pliny *Naturalis historia* 28.46.

<sup>109</sup> Lucan 543–47.

<sup>110</sup> Haas, 42.

<sup>111</sup> Zias and Sekeles 1985, 23.

<sup>112</sup> Diodorus Siculus, 25.5.2.

tested in the written record than is tying. Second, some of the confusion in the past regarding the issue of nailing and tying has arisen from confusing the practice of crucifixion with *arbor infelix*. Third, it is probable that most people crucified were attached to the cross with their arms outstretched in an upright position. Fourth, nailing is most frequently mentioned during the time and in the place where Jesus lived—in the first century A.D. and under Rome rule. Fifth, this suggests that the Jerusalemite Jehohanan was more likely to have been nailed through the forearms, as originally asserted by Haas, than that he was tied. Sixth, the number of people crucified at one time is not necessarily related to the use of nails or ropes. Seventh, the lack of archeological evidence related to nails is most likely attributed to economic concerns leading to their reuse and secondarily their employment as magical healing amulets.

A study of ancient sources, historical context, and archeology are invaluable in asserting the realities extant in the ancient world. This study has demonstrated that the use of nails for crucifixion was prevalent during the time of Jesus and in his area and is helpful in supporting the historicity of the gospels.

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