

## CHAPTER 19



# TWO CRUCIFIED MEN: INSIGHTS INTO THE DEATH OF JESUS OF NAZARETH

*Andrew C. Skinner*

**O**n a certain day about two thousand years ago, in a small and relatively obscure province of the Roman Empire, a man in the prime of his life took his last breath as he hung nailed to a cross outside a nearby city wall, suffering the final stages of punishment for some offense against the state. As a victim of crucifixion, the man experienced one of the most painful, terrifying, gruesome, and humiliating ways to die that has ever been conceived. The name of the province to which I refer was Judea. The name of the city was, of course, Jerusalem. And the name of the man was . . . Yehohanan ben Hagkol.

Perhaps some were expecting the name of the victim to have been Jesus of Nazareth. He is, without doubt, the most famous and important of all persons ever crucified, but Yehohanan ben Hagkol is important in his own right—even though he is not mentioned in any historical sources and we know almost nothing about his life. Yet, Yehohanan ben Hagkol's physical remains provide us with the *only known* archaeological evidence for the practice of crucifixion in the ancient Roman world, and therefore his circumstance tells us much about the physical aspects of the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth and the horrors he endured.

Yehohanan's physical remains were discovered accidentally in 1968 in the north Jerusalem suburb of Giv'at ha-Mivtar, some 15 km from the Old City of Jerusalem. Yehohanan was crucified sometime between AD 7 and 70—the period roughly contemporaneous with Jesus.<sup>1</sup> One study even opines that “Jehohanan was crucified closer to the time of Jesus' own crucifixion.”<sup>2</sup> He was judged to have been between twenty-four and twenty-eight years of age at the time of crucifixion.

Historical sources inform us that thousands of people like Yehohanan ben Hagkol in Roman Palestine were put to death by crucifixion during the period between Herod the Great and the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. The historian Josephus reports that during a revolt that broke out in Jerusalem after the death of Herod in 4 BC, the Roman leader Quintilius Varus (46 BC–AD 9) crucified two thousand rebellious Jews.<sup>3</sup> There is documentary evidence that crucifixions continued through the years. As the threat of war between the Jewish nation and Rome loomed large in AD 66, Roman Procurator Gessius Florus ordered that Jewish troublemakers be “first scourged and then crucified.”<sup>4</sup> Note here that scourging was used as punishment before administering crucifixion, just as reported in the Gospels (Matthew 27:26; Mark 15:15; John 19:1) and the Book of Mormon (Mosiah 3:9). Perhaps the capstone event in the history of crucifixion took place when Titus (AD 39–81) laid siege to Jerusalem, built an earthworks around it, captured those attempting to escape, and crucified them opposite the city walls. The daily tally of crucifixion victims was five hundred, sometimes

---

1. Rockefeller Museum flier, “The Crucified Man from Giv'at Ha-mivtar” (Jerusalem, 1990). Also, Rockefeller Museum exhibit placard, 1990.

2. Joe Zias and James H. Charlesworth, “Crucifixion: Archaeology, Jesus, and the Dead Sea Scrolls,” in *Jesus and the Dead Sea Scrolls*, ed. James H. Charlesworth (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 284.

3. Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 17.295, trans. Ralph Marcus and Allen Wikgren, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963), 8:509.

4. Josephus, *Jewish Wars* 2.306, trans. H. St. J. Thackeray, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1927), 2:443.

more! “The soldiers, out of rage and hatred, amused themselves by nailing their prisoners in different postures; and so great was their number, that space could not be found for the crosses.”<sup>5</sup> The practice of crucifixion in the empire was finally abolished by Constantine in the fourth century.<sup>6</sup>

The ossuary (casket for bones) containing Yehohanan’s physical remains was of the type used in the reburial process common in Roman Palestine. The ossuary had Yehohanan’s name engraved on it, and its dramatic contents included a right heel bone, with a four-and-one-half-inch crucifixion spike still embedded in the bone. The spike was bent over at the pointed end, indicating perhaps that the spike had hit a knot while being driven into the wood on which Yehohanan was crucified. Other skeletal remains in the ossuary included the victim’s shin bones, which initial examiners said had been broken on purpose, and a right forearm, which examiners thought showed evidence of a spike having been driven into the victim’s wrist as part of the crucifixion process. Though other scholars have since reevaluated these initial claims regarding the shinbones and forearm and find the evidence inconclusive,<sup>7</sup> there is no question about ben Hagkol’s crucifixion.

The grisly action necessary to have produced the physical evidence of Yehohanan’s horrible death would have required each foot of the condemned man to be nailed laterally on opposite outside edges of an upright pole or stake, so that the victim’s legs and feet straddled it. The cross to which Yehohanan was nailed was composed of two parts: an upright piece set in the ground, sometimes

---

5. Josephus, *Jewish Wars* 5.451, in Thackeray, *Jewish Wars*, 3:341. For the entire story, see Josephus, *Jewish Wars* 5.446-51.

6. Zias and Charlesworth, “Crucifixion: Archaeology, Jesus,” 278.

7. Zias and Charlesworth, “Crucifixion: Archaeology, Jesus,” 280. Joseph Zias and Eliezer Sekeles, “The Crucified Man from Giv’at ha-Mivtar—A Reappraisal,” *Biblical Archaeologist* 48/3 (September 1985): 190. This earliest report of the reassessment is less tentative than latter ones—omitting any words like “inconclusive,” or “in our estimation.” Perhaps the perspective which time brings allowed scholars to be less strident and declarative.

referred to as a *stipes* (pole), and a detachable crossbar called a *partibulum*. The Gospel writers uniformly referred to Jesus's cross as simply a *stauros*, meaning “stake.”

Scholars who worked on the sobering discovery of Yehohanan's remains tell us that written sources support the inferences deduced from Yehohanan's physical remains—“that the condemned [party] never carried the complete cross. . . . Instead only the crossbar was carried, to the place [where] the upright piece was set in the ground.”<sup>8</sup>

Further forensic evidence from Yehohanan's physical remains tells us that when his feet were nailed to the upright portion of the cross, “an olive wood plaque was put between the head of each nail and the foot, probably to prevent the condemned [person's feet] from pulling free of the nail. Evidence for this consists of [olive] wood fragments found below the head of the nail [embedded in Yehohanan's heel],” as determined from careful examination by scholars from the Department of Botany at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem.<sup>9</sup>

The scholars and scientists who worked on ben Hagkol's remains have made two other comments worth noting. First, “It is important to remember that death by crucifixion was not caused by the traumatic injury of nailing; rather, hanging from the cross resulted in a painful process of asphyxiation, in which the two sets of muscles used for breathing—the intercostal muscles and the diaphragm—became progressively weakened. In time, the victim expired as a consequence of inability to continue breathing properly.”<sup>10</sup> Quite literally, victims of crucifixion drowned in their own fluid that accumulated in the lungs. The implication here is clear: it would have been impossible to resuscitate a dead victim of crucifixion (as some anti-resurrection advocates have claimed about Jesus).

8. Zias and Eliezer, “Crucified Man,” 190.

9. Zias and Eliezer, “Crucified Man,” 190.

10. Zias and Eliezer, “Crucified Man,” 190.

According to the second comment: “We do not know the crime for which [Yehohanan ben Hagkol] was sentenced to a death of agony on the cross. However, historical sources tell that the Romans adopted crucifixion for the execution of slaves, prisoners and rebels.”<sup>11</sup>

### **Jesus of Nazareth**

This brings us to the most famous case of crucifixion in all of history—Jesus of Nazareth. For, in truth, the understandings derived from the physical remains of Yehohanan ben Hagkol, and from the insights of scholars who investigated ben Hagkol’s case, can be combined with historical and prophetic sources, including scripture, to provide us with a clearer picture of what likely happened to Jesus and thus increase our appreciation for him—which, in turn, may help to teach us profound lessons about committed discipleship in the face of significant suffering.<sup>12</sup>

The scriptural record indicates that Jesus’s crucifixion was preceded by several exhaustive hours of teaching, redemptive suffering, and sheer endurance, first in the Upper Room where he performed the ordinances of the sacrament and the washing of the feet, then in Gethsemane where he bled from every pore as God the Father withdrew his life-sustaining Spirit, for the first time, during the last twenty-four hours of the Son’s mortal life,<sup>13</sup> and finally during his arrest and abuse-filled arraignments before the Jewish high priest, the “council” or Sanhedrin, the Roman prefect, Pontius Pilate, and the tetrarch of Galilee, Herod Antipas.

Scholars writing about Yehohanan ben Hagkol’s remains asserted that crucifixion was applied to slaves, prisoners, and rebels. That Jesus was treated as all of these—a slave, common criminal,

11. Rockefeller Museum flier, “The Crucified Man from Giv’at Ha-mivtar.”

12. We know that the kingdom of the blessed will be made up of those “who had offered sacrifice in the similitude of the great sacrifice of the Son of God, and had suffered tribulation in their Redeemer’s name” (D&C 138:13).

13. Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses*, 3:205-6. Also, see the discussion in Andrew C. Skinner, *Gethsemane* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2002), 100.

rebel, and political insurrectionist—from the moment of his arrest onward, and that his execution was thus a foregone conclusion, is seen in several individual actions taken against him.

Jesus's execution was an unalterable decision well before his arrest—a “done deal,” so to speak. Two days before the Feast of Passover, and therefore at least forty-eight hours before his arrest, there were “assembled together the chief priests, and the scribes, and the elders of the people, unto the palace of the high priest, who was called Caiaphas, and consulted that they might take Jesus by subtilty, and kill him” (Matthew 26:3-4; see also Luke 22:1-4). As a result of this final conspiratorial conference, Jesus's fate was sealed.

The first of the individual actions against Jesus that show him being treated presumptively as a criminal came as he emerged from Gethsemane. He was, in the words of Elder Bruce R. McConkie, “led away with a rope around his neck, *as a common criminal*, to be judged by the arch-criminals who as Jews sat in Aaron's seat and who as Romans wielded Caesar's power.”<sup>14</sup> With the rope around his neck, Jesus became, perhaps unintentionally, the symbolic reenactment and the foreseen fulfillment of the Yom Kippur scapegoat of Mosaic law that was led to the edge of the wilderness to perish on the Day of Atonement while bearing the sins of the covenant people. These sins had been transferred to the scapegoat through the laying on of hands by the high priest, as recorded in Leviticus 16:21-22:

And Aaron shall lay both his hands upon the head of the live goat, and confess over him all the iniquities of the children of Israel, and all their transgressions in all their sins, putting them upon the head of the goat, and shall send him away by the hand of a fit man into the wilderness:

And the goat shall bear upon him all their iniquities unto a land not inhabited: and he shall let go the goat in the wilderness.

---

14. Bruce R. McConkie, “The Purifying Power of Gethsemane,” *Ensign*, May 1985, 9, emphasis added.

This, of course, is an apt metaphor for Jesus and his salvific mission, but it in no way absolves the conspiratorial leaders of the Jewish nation of their shameful deeds and unjust treatment of the Innocent One.

Second, the Gospels report in varying degrees of detail that as Jesus was arraigned before various Jewish tribunals he was subjected to the kind of verbal and physical abuse merited by slaves and criminals. Each of the Gospels has some kind of an account of the punishment and indignities endured by Jesus, first at the hands of the former high priest, Annas; then the current high priest, Caiaphas, and his servants; and then the council. The Greek text clarifies the exact nature of the abuse heaped on Jesus:

- Matthew 26:67 says: “they spat (*eneptusan*) into his face,” “they struck (*ekolaphisan*) him,” and “they slapped (*erapisan*) him.” The meaning of *ekolaphisan* (from *kolaphizō*) is to strike or punch with a clenched fist; whereas *erapisan* means to strike with an open palm.<sup>15</sup> The difference is somewhat clouded in the King James Version. But it is an important distinction since slapping (with open palm) is merited by slaves—the lowest rung on the social ladder in the Mediterranean world.
- Mark 14:65 is the fullest account of the punishments delivered and says: “some began to spit (*emptuein*) on him,” “to cover (*perikaluptein*) his face,” “[to] strike (*kolaphizein*) him,” “and the servants received him with slaps (*rapismasin*).” This is significant because here it is servants of the high priest who slap Jesus—indicating that he is regarded as lower than the servants themselves, the *hupēretai*, which is a Greek word meaning those who “do hard service,”<sup>16</sup> or those next to slaves in social order. Jesus is treated as being lower than a Jewish slave.

---

15. See the discussion in Adam Clarke, *The New Testament of Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ . . . Marginal Readings and Parallel Texts: A Commentary and Critical Notes*, new ed. (Nashville: Abingdon, n.d.), 5:262.

16. H. G. Liddell and R. Scott, *A Lexicon: Abridged from Liddell and Scott's Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: University Press, 1976), 736.

- Luke 22:63-64 uses a different vocabulary in describing Jesus's abusive treatment: "the men, holding him in custody were ridiculing (*enepaizon*) him," "beating (*derontes*) him," and "blindfolded (*perikalupsantes*) him." Luke's use of the word *derontes*, from the root *dero*, implies a different kind of beating than slapping or cuffing with closed fist. In classical Greek it means "to skin, flay," also "to cudgel, thrash."<sup>17</sup> Significantly, this same root is used previously by Luke when reporting Jesus's own teachings about discipleship, which he himself set in the context of the master-slave relationship. The King James Version reads: "And that servant [here the Greek uses *doulos* or slave], which knew his lord's will, and prepared not himself, neither did according to his will, shall be beaten with many stripes" (Luke 12:47). One notes here that the kind of beating the slave receives in Jesus's hypothetical story is exactly the kind that Jesus received in actuality at his arraignment before the high priest and council, according to Luke, thus pointing again to Jesus's status as slave.
- John 18:22 is unique in that it reports that the first abusive treatment Jesus received came before he ever stood before Caiaphas or the Sanhedrin. According to John, Jesus was first taken to Annas, a former high priest in the days of Jesus's youth and father-in-law of Caiaphas. None of the other writers mention Annas, who seems to have been something of a behind-the-scenes power broker within the structure of Jewish leadership. The implication seems to be that if Annas found Jesus worthy of conviction, then Caiaphas would move ahead freely. Another indicator of Annas's preeminence, or influence at least, is seen in the fact that five of his sons went on to become high priests. Annas had been appointed high priest by the Roman legate Quirinius, at age 37. He ruled as high priest from AD 7 to 15, when he was deposed by Valerius Gratus. In Annas's

---

17. Liddell and Scott, *Lexicon*, 155.



presence Jesus was slapped (*rapisma*) by a servant (*hupēretōn*), who “struck Jesus with the palm of his hand.”

The implication in John is clear: the treatment Jesus received was geared toward slaves who were guilty of misdeeds. In this context it seems significant to note that originally only slaves were crucified, though later, provincial freedmen were added to the list. Roman citizens were exempted under every circumstance.<sup>18</sup>

It must also be noted that though Jesus received all the physical and emotional indignities and vexations that the real archcriminals (to use Elder McConkie’s words) could hurl at him, Jesus sought no revenge, though it was completely within his power to do so (Matthew 26:52-53). He bore all punishment with meekness—that sublime quality of exhibiting poise in the face of provocation—and thus surpassed even the meekness possessed by his great foreshadower-prophet, Moses (see Numbers 12:3 and Moses 1:6).

Third, the witnesses brought to bear against Jesus, as well as the charges leveled against him, clearly show that he was already regarded as a rebel worthy of death by crucifixion. According to Matthew and Mark, Jesus was charged with prophesying that he would personally destroy and rebuild the temple. “And there arose certain, and bare false witness against him, saying, We heard him say, I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and within three days I will build another made without hands” (Mark 14:57-58). Jewish leaders were so intent on making sure Jesus was adjudged worthy of death on account of a capital offense that they “sought false witness against Jesus, to put him to death” (Matthew 26:59). The nature of the charges against Jesus are explained by Elder James E. Talmage: “The plan of the conspiring rulers appears to have been that of convicting Christ on a charge of sedition, making Him out to be a dangerous disturber of the nation’s peace, an

---

18. See the discussion of Kaufmann Kohler and Emil G. Hirsch, “Crucifixion,” in *Jewish Encyclopedia* at [http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/view\\_friendly.jsp?artid=905&letter=C](http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/view_friendly.jsp?artid=905&letter=C) (accessed 14 June 2011).

assailant of established institutions, and consequently an inciter of opposition against the vassal autonomy of the Jewish nation, and the supreme dominion of Rome.”<sup>19</sup>

Jesus was also vulnerable to the charge of blasphemy because his supposed prophecy of the destruction and rebuilding of the temple amounted to a messianic claim, as seen in the high priest’s inquiry as to whether or not Jesus really thought he was the Messiah. In fact, Caiaphas seems to have equated the title “Christ” (Messiah) with the title “Son of God,” as noted by Matthew. “And the high priest answered and said unto him, I adjure thee by the living God, that thou tell us whether thou be the Christ, the Son of God” (Matthew 26:63). In this instance the Gospel of Mark uses “Son of the Blessed” (14:61) instead of the more assertive “Son of God,” based perhaps on an original Aramaism, but meaning the same. John 1:49 further indicates that the Messiah was also assumed to be the King of Israel during Jesus’s day. Nathanael affirms to Jesus, “Rabbi, thou art the Son of God; thou art the King of Israel.” Thus, in first-century Judaism three titles went together; they were the equivalent of one another: Messiah (Christ), Son of God, and King of Israel. Jesus of Nazareth was correctly identified by all three epithets. In response to the high priest’s direct question about his identity, Jesus left no room for doubt. As he did when he was first arrested in Gethsemane, Jesus identified himself by using the divine name “I am” (Mark 14:62)—the term by which Jehovah identified himself on Sinai (Exodus 3:14). This “was an unqualified avowal of divine parentage, and inherent Godship.”<sup>20</sup> In this Jesus was guilty of nothing except telling the truth.

Caiaphas tore his clothes when he heard Jesus’s answer—an ancient custom performed either to convey shock, outrage, or grief or to signify the death of a family or community member (Genesis 37:34; Numbers 14:6; 2 Samuel 1:11). Then Caiaphas immediately forestalled any verdict other than guilty: “He hath spoken

19. James E. Talmage, *Jesus the Christ* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1962), 624–25.

20. Talmage, *Jesus the Christ*, 626.

blasphemy; what further need have we of witnesses? . . . What think ye? (Matthew 26:65-66). To these carefully orchestrated manipulations, the entire council responded, “He is guilty of death” (Matthew 26:66). Jesus was now “had” on all counts. As had been determined before his Jewish trial ever began, Jesus would be crucified. He had been treated as a slave during the proceedings. After his Jewish arraignment he was a convicted criminal and rebel, found guilty of blasphemy and sedition.

When Jesus was delivered to Pontius Pilate, the Roman prefect or governor (Matthew 27:2), there occurred what amounted to a second trial. The charge against him at this juncture seems to have distilled around the specific claim that he was “king of the Jews,” as reported in all four Gospels (Matthew 27:11; Mark 15:2; Luke 23:3; John 18:33). Some see in this charge “a secular equivalent of a messianic claim.”<sup>21</sup> As Luke indicates, the Jewish leaders apparently wanted Pilate to believe that Jesus’s intent was to rebel against Roman rule. “And they began to accuse him, saying, We found this fellow perverting [Greek, *diastrephonta* “misleading”] the nation, and forbidding to give tribute to Caesar, saying that he himself is Christ a King” (Luke 23:2). That this was the charge that ultimately made him worthy of death in Roman eyes is further supported by the content of the *titulus* or plaque placed on the top of his cross, “THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS” (Luke 23:38). At the heart of this claim to being king of the Jews was, again, sedition. The Jewish leaders wanted Rome to believe that Jesus had set himself up as ruler in juxtaposition to the sanctioned Jewish authorities. Therefore, Jesus was a rebel of the worst kind, religious and political.

### The Cross

The modern commentators who have discussed the other crucified man of this essay, Yehohanan ben Hagkol, emphasize that

---

21. Dale Patrick, “Crimes and Punishment, Old Testament and New Testament,” in *The New Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2006), 1:802.

the evidence indicates that the configuration of ben Hagkol's cross, as well as those of others, was in two parts, a detachable crossbar (which the condemned persons carried to the place of their executions) and an upright piece set in the ground to which the crossbar was attached.<sup>22</sup> Secular sources support this assessment. An important writer, Plautus, refers to a victim carrying a crossbar throughout the city and then being fastened on a cross.<sup>23</sup> Since no executions were allowed within Jerusalem's walls (Numbers 15:35; 1 Kings 21:13; Acts 7:58), processions led to the site or sites of crucifixion outside the city. In Jesus's case, the procession was led by a centurion and accompanied by at least a quaternion (four soldiers) to keep the procession moving (John 19:23). One of the soldiers carried the sign (*titulus*) on which the condemned man's name and crime were written and which was later fastened to the top of the cross (Matthew 27:37; Mark 15:26; Luke 23:38; John 19:19-22).

Biblical references indicate the possibility that the upright piece to which Jesus's crossbar was fastened was a tree whose branches had been trimmed off. The apostle Paul seems to refer to this in his discussion of Christ's many-faceted redemptive act: "Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us: for it is written, Cursed is every one that hangeth on a tree" (Galatians 3:13). Paul was quoting Deuteronomy 21:23, which may be viewed as a prophetic reference made by Moses to the future crucifixion of the Savior (the book of Deuteronomy consisting of Moses's final three sermons). This Deuteronomic passage was used by later Jews to emphasize the abhorrent nature of crucifixion as a way to die, that is, "*cursed* is every one that hangeth on a tree." Paul was saying that Jesus redeemed every one of us from the impossibility of being perfected through the Mosaic law by being crucified on a tree, even though it was an abhorrent and degrading form of death.

---

22. Zias and Sekeles, "Crucified Man," 190.

23. Plautus, *Carbonaria* 2.

The apostle Peter also refers to the tree as the method of Jesus's crucifixion. He speaks of our Savior as the one "who his own self bare our sins in his own body on the tree, that we, being dead to sins, should live unto righteousness: by whose stripes ye were healed" (1 Peter 2:24).

Crucifixion (Hebrew verb תלה) on "the tree" was also mentioned in the *Temple Scroll* as punishment for special offenses against the true community of Israel (Qumran covenanters):

If a man slanders his people and delivers his people to a foreign nation and does evil to his people, you shall hang him on a tree and he shall die. On the testimony of two witnesses and on the testimony of three witnesses he shall be put to death and they shall hang him on the tree. If a man is guilty of a capital crime and flees (abroad) to the nations, and curses his people, the children of Israel, you shall hang him also on the tree, and he shall die. But his body shall not stay overnight on the tree. Indeed you shall bury him on the same day. For he who is hanged on the tree is accursed of God and men. You shall not pollute the ground which I give you to inherit.<sup>24</sup>

One important reason why condemned persons may have been crucified on well-rooted, trimmed trees may be connected to the reason why the condemned also carried only the crossbar (*paticulum*) and not the entire cross to their crucifixions. There was a shortage of wood. Josephus indicates that wood was so scarce in the Jerusalem area during the first century AD that the Romans had to travel ten miles outside the city to procure timber for their siege.<sup>25</sup>

---

24. 11Q Temple 64:6-13. See Geza Vermes, trans., "The Temple Scroll," in *The Complete Dead Sea Scrolls in English*, rev. ed. (London: Penguin Books, 2004), 218. See also Yigael Yadin, *The Temple Scroll: Text and Commentary* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1977), 2:288-91. The *Temple Scroll*, longest of all the Dead Sea Scrolls, is one of the most important, referred to by some scholars as the sixth book of the Torah.

25. Josephus, *Jewish Wars* 5.522-23.

The scarcity of wood thus affected the economics of crucifixion to the point that crossbars needed to be reused, and existing trees that could be repeatedly used facilitated the process.

Crucifixion may have originated in Persia long before the Romans adopted it, although one source puts its beginnings in Egypt.<sup>26</sup> Wherever it started, there is no doubt that it was one of the most horrific forms of execution ever invented by humankind. According to the Roman writer Cicero and the Jewish historian Josephus, crucifixion was the worst, most pitiable form of death!<sup>27</sup> Cicero, arguably Rome's greatest statesman, detested crucifixion, calling it the "cruellest and most disgusting penalty," the "extreme and ultimate punishment for slaves."<sup>28</sup> (Again, we see the connection between Jesus's implied status as slave and the punishments he had to bear.) The Roman writers Juvenal, Suetonius, Horace, Pliny, and Seneca all have appalling things to say about crucifixion. In fact, the words *cross* and *crucify* actually derive from the Latin word for torture, *cruciare*. The nail found embedded in ben Hagkol's heel bone goes a long way toward substantiating historical assessments.

Crucifixion was state-sponsored torture, calculated to produce the greatest amount of suffering over the longest possible period before death. Being a public event or spectacle, Rome's aim in supporting crucifixion, more than individual punishment, was deterrence or prevention. "Whenever we crucify the condemned, the most crowded roads are chosen, where the most people can see and be moved by this terror. For penalties relate not so much to retribution as to their exemplary effect."<sup>29</sup> Crucifixion has also been called state-sponsored terrorism.<sup>30</sup>

26. Joseph W. Hewitt, "The Use of Nails in the Crucifixion," *Harvard Theological Review* 25/1 (1932): 40.

27. See Cicero, *Against Verres* 2.5.165; Josephus, *Jewish Wars* 7.203.

28. Cicero, *Against Verres* 2.5.165, 169.

29. Ps. Quintilian, *Declamations* 274; Ps. Manetho, *Apotelesmatica* 4.198-200; Aristophanes, *Thesmophoriazusae* 1029, quoted in Craig A. Evans, "Crucifixion," in *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, 1:807.

30. Richard Neitzel Holzapfel, *A Lively Hope: The Suffering, Death, Resurrection, and Exaltation of Jesus Christ* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1999), 64.

Frederick W. Farrar’s summary of the effects of crucifixion is still one of the best and most succinct:

A death by crucifixion seems to include all that pain and death can have of the horrible and ghastly—dizziness, cramp, thirst, starvation, sleeplessness, traumatic fever, tetanus, publicity of shame, long continuance of torment, horror of anticipation, mortification of untended wounds, all intensified just up to the point at which they can be endured at all, but all stopping just short of the point which would give to the sufferer the relief of unconsciousness. The unnatural position made every movement painful; the lacerated veins and crushed tendons throbbed with incessant anguish; the wounds, inflamed by exposure, gradually gangrened; the arteries, especially of the head and stomach, became swollen and oppressed with surcharged blood; and while each variety of misery went on gradually increasing, there was added to them the intolerable pang of a burning and raging thirst. . . . Such was the death to which Christ was doomed.<sup>31</sup>

Truly, Jesus of Nazareth came to earth and suffered the very worst that men ever inflicted.<sup>32</sup>

The use of nails was particularly grisly and effective in achieving desired aims. Ben Hagkol’s remains substantiate the New Testament account of nails being used in Jesus’s crucifixion. Many other literary sources confirm that nails were the usual way of crucifying individuals. Though the scriptures themselves do not describe the actual scene of Jesus being nailed to the cross, we know nails were used: “The other disciples therefore said unto [Thomas], We have seen the Lord. But he said unto them, Except I shall see in his hands

---

31. Frederick W. Farrar, *The Life of Christ* (New York: Dutton, 1884), 440, quoted in Bruce R. McConkie, *Doctrinal New Testament Commentary* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1976), 1:816.

32. See the excellent summary in Richard L. Anderson’s, “The Ancient Practice of Crucifixion,” *Ensign*, July 1975, 32–33.

the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails . . . I will not believe” (John 20:25).<sup>33</sup>

In addition to confirming the New Testament record, ben Hagkol’s physical remains also provide a graphic visual reminder of the fulfillment of Isaiah’s messianic prediction of Jesus’s trauma some seven centuries before it actually occurred.

And I will clothe him with thy robe, and strengthen him with thy girdle, and I will commit thy government into his hand: and he shall be a father to the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and to the house of Judah.

And the key of the house of David will I lay upon his shoulder; so he shall open, and none shall shut; and he shall shut, and none shall open.

And I will fasten him as a nail in a sure place; and he shall be for a glorious throne to his father’s house.

And they shall hang upon him all the glory of his father’s house, the offspring and the issue, all vessels of small quantity, from the vessels of cups, even to all the vessels of flagons.

In that day, saith the Lord of hosts, shall the nail that is fastened in the sure place be removed, and be cut down, and fall; and the burden that was upon it shall be cut off: for the Lord hath spoken it. (Isaiah 22:21-25)

In this passage, Isaiah, whose entire book constitutes a powerful witness of both the first and the second comings of the Messiah, describes the multifaceted role of a ruler and redeemer in the guise of a servant of God named Eliakim (a name that means “God shall cause to rise” and is itself messianic).

1. He would be given the government, or right to rule (v. 21).
2. He would be a father to the house of Judah (v. 21).
3. He would be given “the key of the house of David” (v. 22).

---

33. See also Jesus’s own testimony as the risen Lord in 3 Nephi 11:14-15.



4. He would be fastened to something as “a nail in a sure place” (v. 23).

5. Upon him would be “hung,” or placed, the glory of his father’s house (v. 24).

6. He would be involved in the removing of the burden associated with “the nail that is fastened in the sure place” (v. 25).

Indeed, in one way or another this list describes the mission and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth, for by virtue of his mortal life and atoning sacrifice, he alone fits the characteristics enumerated by Isaiah:

1. He alone possesses the government—the power and authority to rule in heaven and on earth—and he will do so at his second coming (D&C 58:22).

2. He is the father, or king, of the Jews (as the title on his cross rightly declared; Matthew 27:37), and he alone is the spiritual father of Israel and of all who obey him (Mosiah 27:25). Indeed he may rightfully be called the Father through divine investiture of authority: “The Father has honored Christ by placing his name upon him, so that he can minister in and through that name as though he were the Father; and thus, so far as power and authority are concerned, his words and acts become and are those of the Father.”<sup>34</sup>

3. He alone possesses the “key of the house of David,” the symbol of absolute power and authority (both monarchial and priestly) invested in the true Messiah, who descends literally from Israel’s greatest monarch, King David (Revelation 3:7).

4. He was in very deed fastened to the cross both *as* and *with* “a nail in a sure place” (Isaiah 22:23).

5. He had the glory of his Father’s house placed upon him during the last week of his ministry when he referred to the Jerusalem temple not as “my Father’s house” (which he had done at the

---

34. Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1954-56), 1:29-30.

beginning of his ministry; John 2:16) but rather as “my house” (after his triumphal entry; Matthew 21:13).

6. Last, but not least, he alone is the one who took upon himself the great “burden” referred to by Isaiah, and who removed that burden from the world when “the nail that [was] fastened in the sure place [was] removed” (Isaiah 22:25). In other words, Jesus the Messiah removed from us the burden of physical and spiritual death when he completed the atonement (that is, after he was removed from the cross, buried, and resurrected).

Several sources, both LDS and non-LDS, assert that nails or spikes were driven through Jesus’s wrists in addition to the palms of his hands for fear that the weight of his body would cause it to tear away from the cross. Medical authorities attest that it “has been shown that the ligaments and bones of the wrist can support the weight of a body hanging from them, but the palms [alone] cannot.”<sup>35</sup> Thus, the nails driven into Jesus’s wrists securely fastened him to the cross and fulfilled Isaiah’s prophecy of the nail fastened in the sure place. There is hardly a more powerful image in scripture for Latter-day Saints than the one Isaiah uses of the nail in the sure place. It links the physical act of Jesus’s crucifixion with the profoundest rituals and most sacred ordinances in Latter-day Saint theology and practice, such as the sacrament.

By expertly pounding nails through the wrists of a victim’s outstretched arms and hands, without breaking bones or piercing major blood vessels, and yet crushing or severing important nerves, “excruciating bolts of fiery pain in both arms” were produced, as well as “paralysis of a portion of the hand.” Additionally, “ischemic contractures and impalement of various ligaments by the iron spike

---

35. 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 (21 March 1986): 1460. Though criticized by some scholars for the historical portion of its discussion of crucifixion, as well as trying to “validate” Christianity, the medical information is most helpful.

might produce a clawlike grasp.”<sup>36</sup> When the victim was nailed to the crossbar and lifted into place on the stake, or tree, the victim’s arms would bear the full weight of his body. As the victim sagged and more weight was put on the wrists, excruciating pain would shoot along the fingers and up the arms. To relieve some of the pain in the hands, wrists, and arms, the victim would push down on his feet to raise himself up with the result that searing pain would shoot up the legs from the nail wounds in the feet. At some point, waves of cramps would sweep over the muscles of the legs and feet, causing throbbing pain as well as the inability to push upward and relieve the pain and pressure in the arms and wrists. Also, with the arms stretched out on the cross, breathing became increasingly difficult. Air could be drawn into the lungs but not exhaled, and asphyxiation eventually resulted.<sup>37</sup> When the legs of victims were broken, as reported in John 19:31-33, death resulted much more quickly because of the added shock to the body and the inability of the victim to raise up his body and stave off asphyxiation.

However, it is still fair to say that crucifixion was an agonizingly slow way to die. Under normal circumstances, a crucified body was left hanging on the cross to rot and be picked at by birds and insects. It is believed that this sometimes occurred while the victim was still alive, even if just barely. This, combined with the unnatural and contorted position of the body on the cross contributed to the victim’s misery. Jesus’s horrible circumstance was attested to by Israel’s ancient psalmist: “I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint: my heart is like wax; it is melted in the midst of my bowels” (Psalm 22:14). Yehohanan ben Hagkol’s similar circumstance (contorted position) was alluded to by the

---

36. Edwards, Gabel, and Hosmer, “On the Physical Death of Jesus Christ,” 1460.

37. See the summary in C. Truman Davis, “A Physician Testifies about Crucifixion,” *Review of the News* (14 April 1976): 39.

obscure inscription on his ossuary, which indicates that he was posthumously nicknamed the “one hanged with knees apart.”<sup>38</sup>

### **The Two Tombs**

The location of ben Hagkol’s ancient tomb in modern North Jerusalem is not an insignificant detail. It suggests some important considerations in determining both the place of Jesus’s crucifixion as well as the location of his tomb, which was originally the property of Joseph of Arimathaea (Matthew 27:57-60). The latter was a respected member of the great Sanhedrin, who knew Jewish law and attendant issues regarding burials. As he would have been aware, a major issue to be considered regarding tomb placement in the Second Temple period of Jerusalem’s history was ritual purity.

In first-century Palestine there existed a prohibition against placing burial sites to the west of Jerusalem for at least two important reasons. First, because prevailing winds in the Holy Land are from the west, if the dead were buried west of the city the odor of decomposing bodies could be carried through the city. It should be remembered that Jews did not embalm their dead prior to burial, but left corpses to decompose in the tomb before re-interring the remaining bones in an ossuary of the kind containing Yehohanan ben Hagkol’s bones. Second, though the scent of decaying corpses was certainly unpleasant, far worse was the condition of ritual impurity those corpses conveyed. Jews believed that ritual uncleanness or impurity was a consequence of any and all contact with dead bodies, and this impurity was even conveyed secondarily, through contact with other persons who came in contact with the dead. Indeed, impurity could be carried over the city by the prevailing winds and thereby cause all living inhabitants of Jerusalem to become ritually impure or defiled.<sup>39</sup> Thus, Jerusalemites placed their tombs to the

38. Yigael Yadin, “Epigraphy and Crucifixion,” *Israel Exploration Journal* 23 (1973): 22.

39. On this point, see the excellent discussion in Jeffrey R. Chadwick, “Revisiting Golgotha and the Garden Tomb,” *Religious Educator* 4/1 (2003): 16.

north, east, or south of the Holy City to control at least one source of ritual defilement. Yehohanan ben Hagkol's tomb is dramatic witness to this policy.

The prohibition against tombs to the west of Jerusalem especially involved the temple. From about 20 BC onward, Herod the Great and his successors supervised the expansion of the temple and Temple Mount, making it the architectural jewel of the Mediterranean world. Modern scholars working in the Holy Land have shown that the beliefs and practices of the Pharisees were the basis for most Jewish practices, including those involving the temple, during the Herodian period. The Pharisees predominated in the Sanhedrin during this time. Pharisaic tradition "would not have permitted tomb construction anywhere directly west of the expanded Temple Mount because wind passing over western tombs would also have passed over the sacred temple enclosure, thus defiling it and anyone in it."<sup>40</sup>

It now becomes clear how the issue of ritual impurity impacted the location of the crucifixion and entombment of Jesus of Nazareth. Some well-known New Testament scholars have concluded that since "burial customs in the first half of the first century C.E. [AD] preclude burials and their attendant impurities west (windward) of the Temple, then the crucifixion and burial of Jesus could not have taken place at the site of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, which is almost exactly due west of the Holy of Holies."<sup>41</sup> The Holy of Holies was the most sacred portion of the Jerusalem temple, the holiest spot on earth, and was to be guarded above all else. Thus the location of the crucifixion and entombment of Jesus was not near the Church of the Holy Sepulchre.

The linking of the locations of Jesus's crucifixion and burial follows from the Gospel narratives, especially John.

---

40. Chadwick, "Revisiting Golgotha and the Garden Tomb," 17.

41. John J. Rousseau and Rami Arav, *Jesus and His World* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 169.

Now in the place where he was crucified there was a garden; and in the garden a new sepulchre, wherein was never man yet laid.

There laid they Jesus therefore because of the Jews' preparation day; for the sepulchre was nigh at hand. (John 19:41-42)

That Jesus's tomb was located in a real garden and not some overgrown weed patch, as some have suggested, is confirmed by Mary Magdalene on the first Easter morning when she initially supposed she was talking to the "gardener" (John 20:15).

While we do not know if Yehohanan ben Hagkol was crucified near his burial site north of Jerusalem's Old City walls, we believe that Jesus's crucifixion and burial took place to the north of the city. While no crucifixions took place within Jerusalem's walls, Jesus's crucifixion was *near* the city (John 19:20). We know also that the crucifixion was within moderate calling distance of a nearby road. People passing by the site derided Jesus on the cross (Matthew 27:39; Mark 15:29), and bystanders heard him cry out, but misunderstood and thought he was calling to Elijah. What he actually said was, "Eli, Eli . . . My God, my God" (Matthew 27:46-47; Mark 15:34-35). This may indicate that there was just enough distance between the road and the cross to prevent some passersby from hearing clearly or picking up nuances of speech. In truth, this ultimate cry of pathos from the cross is fulfillment of the ancient psalmist's messianic prescience: "I will say unto God my rock, Why hast thou forgotten me?" (Psalm 42:9).<sup>42</sup> In Jesus's situation we see the psalm literally being acted out.

As Jesus hung on the cross, he endured great humiliation, perhaps even greater than was the common lot of all crucifixion victims.<sup>43</sup> The synoptic Gospels report that passersby, as well as the

42. The Hebrew of Psalm 42:9 (42:10 in Hebrew) is slightly different from Matthew's (or Mark's) report of "Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani" (Matthew 27:46). The Hebrew reads, "*lamah shakachtani*."

43. All victims were crucified alongside the most crowded roads for maximum humiliation (see Quintilian, *Declamations* 274), but the Gospels seem to report an extra

members of the gathered crowd, mocked and ridiculed him. These included some of the same ones who had engineered the whole conspiracy (the chief priests, scribes, and elders). They not only railed at him and reviled him, wagging their heads as one might do to a fool who had been told better, but also twisted his own words to make those words appear to be the height of foolishness and arrogance. “Thou that destroyest the temple, and buildest it in three days, save thyself” (Matthew 27:40). “He trusted in God; let him deliver him now . . . for he said, I am the Son of God” (Matthew 27:43). “Save thyself, and come down from the cross” (Mark 15:30). “Let Christ the King of Israel descend now from the cross, that we may see and believe” (Mark 15:32). “He saved others; let him save himself, if he be Christ, the chosen of God” (Luke 23:35). One notes that the crowd also regarded as true the charges brought against Jesus by the false witnesses who appeared before the Sanhedrin—that of fomenting rebellion through destruction of the temple and rebuilding it according to his own scheme.

All of these statements, as well as the general scene at the cross that they depict, hark back to Psalm 22:7-8, a poetic messianic prophecy of incredible insight found in ancient Israel’s hymnbook (the book of Psalms): “All they that see me laugh me to scorn: they shoot out the lip, they shake the head, saying, He trusted on the Lord that he would deliver him: let him deliver him, seeing he delighted in him.”

There is another significant factor that bears on the location of the crucifixion of Jesus. From Mosaic times onward, Levitical requirements for animal sacrifices and offerings dictated that they be made “on the side of the altar northward before the Lord” (Leviticus 1:11). In other words, tabernacle and temple sacrifices of animals were to be slaughtered north of the great altar of burnt offering or brasen altar (Exodus 27:1-2; 39:39) during the days that the Tabernacle and First Temple (Solomon’s) existed, and north of the great altar

---

measure of humiliation for Jesus.

of sacrifice, “in the area to the north of the Court of the Israelites,”<sup>44</sup> during the days of the Second Temple (Zerubbabel’s and Herod’s).

Since all animal sacrifices (burnt, peace, sin, etc.) symbolized the great and last sacrifice of the Son of God (Alma 34:13-14), down to exact details, it seems essential to look for the location of the crucifixion and entombment of Jesus north of the great altar of the Jerusalem temple, outside Jerusalem’s city walls, near a thoroughfare, constructed in harmony with rules pertaining to ritual purity.

### Calvary

The synoptic Gospels report that at the ninth hour, three o’clock in the afternoon, on a Friday (the eve of Passover), Jesus took his final breath (Matthew 27:46, 50; Luke 23:44-46). He endured the torture of the cross for six hours, having been nailed to it at the third hour or 9:00 a.m. (Mark 15:25). Unlike with Yehohanan ben Hagkol’s circumstance, we are fortunate to have preserved for us the specific name of the place where Jesus was crucified—*Golgotha* (Aramaic) or *Calvary* (Latin), meaning “skull.”

Perhaps the name denoted topographical features (tradition proposes the site to have been an old stone quarry), or maybe it was a symbolic name representing death much the same way the image of a skull and crossbones connotes death in modern times. It has even been suggested that *Golgotha* may have been so named because executed criminals were buried nearby, and the skulls or bones from interred bodies became exposed, on rare occasions, due to the ravages of animals or the elements. This seems problematic since leaving any portion of a corpse unburied was contrary to Jewish law and would have been rectified immediately.<sup>45</sup>

Beyond its specific association with the crucifixion and burial of Jesus, the term *Golgotha* is not attested in ancient sources. It could well have been a local term, contemporary with Jesus’s time only.

44. Miriam Feinberg Vamosh, *Daily Life at the Time of Jesus* (Herzlia, Israel: Palphot, 2001), 23.

45. Talmage, *Jesus the Christ*, 667.



It seems significant that the Joseph Smith Translation of Matthew 27:35; Mark 15:25; and John 19:17 change the word *skull* to *burial*, that is “Golgotha . . . the place of a burial,” indicating perhaps that the proper noun *Golgotha* was associated with the nearby entombment of crucifixion victims and not how it looked topographically. At any rate, the Joseph Smith Translation substantiates the view that the place of Jesus’s crucifixion was very close to his burial.

### Conclusion

Truly, the discovery of Yehohanan ben Hagkol’s tomb and physical remains continues to impress and educate new generations of students of the Bible. It helps flesh out the picture of Jesus’s crucifixion by suggesting intriguing parallels. However, there are also dissimilarities between Jesus’s circumstances and those of Yehohanan ben Hagkol. One of the striking differences we see is that Yehohanan was buried with the remains of another adult as well as a male child who was three to four years old at the time of his death. This fits with the inscription on the ossuary in which the remains were found: “Yehohanan and Yehohanan ben [son of] Yehohanan.” According to scholarly estimation, “There is now no doubt that the son was buried with the father, which was a common Jewish practice during the Second Temple period.”<sup>46</sup> It is also possible that Yehohanan was buried in a family plot. This is very different from Jesus’s interment. He was buried alone, in a borrowed tomb; “none were with [him]” (D&C 133:50).

Perhaps the most important difference between the tombs of Yehohanan ben Hagkol and Jesus of Nazareth again center on their contents, the very thing that made the 1968 discovery possible. Ben Hagkol’s tomb was filled with bones; Jesus’s tomb is empty. And that is the heart of the matter: Jesus of Nazareth was resurrected; he is a physical being who lives in the heavens; he lives to bless and nurture mortals on this earth; he lives to rule and reign as Lord, King, and God for eternity. Nothing can substantiate that fact—no

---

46. Zias and Charlesworth, “Crucifixion: Archaeology, Jesus,” 280.

archaeological discovery, no artifact, no item of material culture—nothing except one thing: the witness of the Holy Spirit.

*Andrew C. Skinner is the Richard L. Evans Professor of Religious Understanding and professor of ancient scripture and Near Eastern studies at Brigham Young University.*