

INTEROFFICE

To: Mr. Ted Armstrong

Date: October 10, 1972

Department:

Subject: The term "Crucifixion"

From: Jon Hill

We have been doing some research on the term "crucifixion" as you requested of Brian some time ago. Here is what we have come up with:

1. Our basic understanding of "stauros" seems to come from Bullinger as per The Companion Bible. He says the term "...never means two pieces of wood placed across one another..." Bullinger seems to be pretty much alone in this opinion, however. Most reference books are fairly unanimous in stating that wherever the Romans used the word "crux", the Greeks used the word "stauros". Stauros is apparently the Greek equivalent of crux.
2. ARNDT-GINGRICH LEXICON OF THE NEW TESTAMENT AND OTHER EARLY CHRISTIAN LITERATURE gives this definition of stauros:

σταυρός, οὔ, ὁ the cross (Hom[er] + in the sense "upright, pointed 'stake' or 'pale') in our literature of the instrument by which the capital punishment of crucifixion was carried out....a stake sunk into the earth in an upright position; a crosspiece was oft[en] (Artemidorus 2,53) attached to its upper part, so that it was shaped like a T or thus --†...."
3. Crucifixion was basically a Roman custom. They derived it from the Greeks or Phoenicians who got it from the Persians who got it from the Assyrians, etc. We find the Roman style of crucifixion described around the time of Christ by Cicero and in Josephus Wars V 11, vi,4. A pole or post was fixed into the ground before the victim was fastened to it. The victim then carried the crosspiece (patibulum) to the place of crucifixion -- his wrists bound to it while being whipped through the streets. Roman writers consistently used the term patibulum for the crosspiece carried. The victims are spoken

of as hanging on a cross (crux) and suspended from the crosspiece (patibulum). See Plautus' Plays, and Seneca. Seneca speaks of "stretching out the arms upon the patibulum." Regarding this well-known phrase, it was prophesied by Christ that Peter would in his death "stretch forth thy hands" (John 21:18). This (that is, this phrase) "signified by what death he would glorify God" (John 21:19). The phrase certainly means crucifixion and to this, later history unanimously attests. When people "stretch out the arms" today, it is normally laterally -- very seldom upward -- above the head. As Seneca said, "stretching out the arm" concerned the patibulum (i.e. the crosspiece), so the phrase (both in Seneca and the Gospel of John seems to signify a pole WITH A LATERAL CROSSPIECE.

4. The Romans definitely used stakes with crosspieces on them. They also used various other shaped instruments including the single upright post. But most commonly, they used the upright pole with the crosspiece on it. [Lively even used the term crux for a single stake -- see Smith's Dictionary, pgs. 28,29].
5. The Greeks applied the term "stauros" to various shaped Roman crosses. They also used the word skolops [a synonym for stauros] and the word xulon [wood or timber]. There seems to be no evidence of any special Greek word used for a Roman cross with a crosspiece.
6. Stauros in Greek is a very broad term roughly corresponding to our word "pole" (not the nationality!). In English, we speak of "telephone poles" which can have numerous crosspieces on them, or a single one -- or none. Etymology alone is often a bad guide to what was literally meant. If any are going by ship to Europe, one would normally say he is "sailing" and not flying. But does he literally mean to go by a "sailing vessel"? Also, the word "prevent" in the N. T. meant "to go before" (and that is its clear etymological meaning) but we use the term "withholding" or "stopping". Etymology in this case becomes absurd to the ordinary man or to common usage today. And this, it must be acknowledged, is how STAUROS was used in the first century. Its etymology demands "pole" or "upright stake", but its usage had wide meaning!
7. Stauros is compared to a mast by the Greek writer Artemidorus of the 2nd century. Ship masts often have spars crossing them. He also compares the ship mast with the horns of a bull.
8. The apocryphal Epistle of Barnabas (70-132 AD) described

stauros as the shape of the Greek letter tau (τ). (Here it is a matter of Greek usage and not a question of religious authority).

9. The pagan Greek writer Lucian (Syria -- 2nd century AD) who has no "Christian" axe to grind, also likens the stauros to the Greek letter "tau".
10. Christ "carried the cross" through the streets. Latin writers spoke of carrying the "patibulum" (the crosspiece) rather than the whole cross. This is then affixed to the crux. Yet when Greek writers talk of the same practice, they speak of carrying the stauros. It was always the patibulum or crosspiece whenever the practice is explicitly described. What grounds have we for regarding the Biblical description as an exception?
11. If it be insisted that the "cross" of the Bible was indeed an upright pale, it is an argument from silence, historically. We could not possibly prove it from the Greek or from history or contemporary Greek usage. It can mean a stake alone -- but there is no evidence to say that it means in a simple etymological sense, that in Biblical usage. The overwhelming evidence from contemporary history and Greek usage in that time speaks for a crosspiece situation. But again, it is not conclusive.
12. If we conclude that it had a crosspiece, we cannot be sure whether the crosspiece was on top of, or below, the main beam. The fact that there was a sign above Christ's head has led some to conclude that it must have been a shape like this -- †. But in the T shaped cross, the victim leaned out and away from the bar, so there would still be room for a sign.
13. Can we conclude that Christ was not crucified on a cross because it was a pagan religious phallic symbol? Probably not! Its religious symbolism is not necessarily related to the grisly practicality of a pagan Roman execution method. Crucifixion was not a religious ceremony. There are two different issues. (The triangle is a religious symbol -- trinity -- but that does not make it un-Christian to use it as a musical instrument). This argument is a non-sequiter. It is only later, in the late 4th century, that false Christianity adopted the pagan cross sign from the mystery system as a symbol of the crucifixion. On the other hand, since Satan was the one who "engineered" Jesus' crucifixion, why wouldn't he use a symbol which related to himself?

14. IMPALE: 1.) To fix upon a sharpened stake or the like
2.) To pierce with a sharpened stake thrust up through the body, as for torture or punishment.
3.) To fix upon, or pierce through with, anything pointed.
4.) To make helpless as if pierced through.
5.) To enclose with or as with pales or stakes; fence in; hem in.

Therefore I suggest we don't use the term, impaled.

15. Conclusion: We cannot determine conclusively that Jesus was not executed on a cross-shaped instrument or pole. The majority of historical evidence is for it rather than against it. Any dogmatism on this point would have to be strictly subjective, unsubstantiated opinion on our part. I don't think we should make an issue of it. Nor do I, or any of us in the research committee, feel that it is wrong to use the term "cross" or "crucifixion". The fact that the Bible does not make an issue of it indicates that perhaps we should not! Probably we should concentrate more on the meaning of Christ's death than the method! This does not mean we condone the use of the Latin (Greek, or whatever) cross on the top of steeples or in churches. It just means that later, pagan Christianity has made an unwarranted importance to it. That so-called importance should be castigated, but the shape of the STAUROS should probably be of little concern.

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