

Articles and Notes

The Cross or the Stake?

By
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And he bearing his cross went forth into a place
called the place of a skull, which is called
in the Hebrew Golgotha:
John 19:17

*T*he cross is one of the most powerful images in the world today. It is not only a prominent fixture on almost all churches in professing Christianity, but it also appears on an endless array of books, booklets, religious tracts, and even Bibles. This symbol can be seen on gospel music albums, religious games, and many forms of jewelry. Crosses appear on necklaces, bracelets and various pins. They have even made their way onto decals and bumper stickers. Some “believers” actually make the symbol of a cross when they begin and conclude praying. Suffice it to say, this image is displayed prolifically throughout the Christian world. The question is: Why? Why do so many have such a profound devotion to this symbol? Furthermore, is this devotion based on a true historical fact? Or, is it just another deception disguised as truth?

The Article that follows examines the historical evidence regarding the instrument on which the Savior of the world was executed. Was it a cross as so many assume? Or, is such a conclusion highly improbable?

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Was Jesus Really Crucified on a Cross?

by
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and
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The cross is regarded as having great importance by the vast majority of Christian denominations throughout the world, and is used in worship by tens of millions of their members. Most “believers” are quick to deny using the cross as a graven image. However, despite this claim almost all professing Christians have some kind of deep emotional attachment to this symbol. For many, no prayer can be said without the frequent use of this icon. Some look upon it as a grand charm. To others it is a great refuge in an

hour of temptation. When danger comes, many “believers” grasp tightly onto the cross as it hangs from their neck. They may even whisper a quick prayer as they kiss this symbol that has such a profound importance to them. This ritual is often accompanied by a glance to the heavens and many believe it instills a sense of connection to their creator.

The History of the Cross

The cross is one of religion’s oldest symbols. And although most people only associate it with Christianity, it has actually been employed by an endless array of beliefs for millennia. Furthermore, its presence in worship can be traced to faiths that existed over fifteen centuries before Jesus of Nazareth walked as a man on the earth. The truth be known, this great religious fixture is actually rooted in a belief that is light years from that proclaimed in the pages of your Bible.

The cross in its earlier forms appeared as the letter “T” and symbolized Tammuz, the ancient god of the Chaldeans and the Egyptians. The mystic “T” was a symbol of great divinity in the ancient world and has been called, “the sign of life.” It was used as an amulet worn over the heart and was inscribed on the official garments of pagan priests (see: *The Two Babylons*, Alexander Hislop 2nd American edition pp. 197-198). Additionally, some ancient religions used the cross as part of the dress of vestal virgins. They would wear them suspended from necklaces which adorned their garments during pagan rites (see: *Pere Lafitan, Moeurs des Sauvages Ameriquains*, vol. i. p. 442).

History reveals that there is hardly a pagan culture where the cross has not been found. For example, the Druids made prolific use of this symbol throughout their worship. When writing about this practice, the 19th century scholar, Thomas Maurice, in his work, *The Indian Antiquities*, made an extraordinary observation about the prominence of the cross in Druidic nature worship. Notice what this distinguished scholar writes:

“The druids in their groves were accustomed to select the most stately and beautiful tree as an emblem of deity they adored. And having cut the side branches, they affixed two of the largest of them to the highest part of the trunk, in such a manner that those branches extended on each side like the arms of a man, and together with the body, presented the appearance of a huge cross, and on the bark, in several places was inscribed the letter t.”

The worship of the cross was not limited to the Druids. It also stands as one of the most prominent figures in Buddhism. Buddhist’s often decorate the cross with leaves and flowers, and refer to this symbol as the “divine tree.” It has also been called the “tree of the gods” and “the tree of life and knowledge.”

However, it is not simply ancient pagan religions that characterize the cross with such words. In the Roman Catholic Church, this symbol is often referred to as the “tree of life.” Members of this great religious body are even taught to address it as follows:

Hail, O Cross, triumphal wood, true salvation of the world, among trees there is none like thee in leaf, flower, and bud. O cross, our only hope, increase righteousness to the godly and pardon the offenses of the guilty.

Clearly the Church of Rome sees the cross as a vital component of worship. It is venerated as a sacred symbol of the faith embraced by the great "Mother Church." With this understanding, let us explore how this icon became such a HUGE part of the "believer's" faith today.

What is a Cross?

The New Testament word "cross" used frequently in the scriptures is actually a translation of the Greek word *stauros* (Strong's Concordance # 4716). Because this term is rendered "cross" by translators, most professing Christians are convinced that Jesus was crucified on a traditional "T" cross (see: A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature, London, England: The University of Chicago Press, 1979, p. 764). But is this true? Understanding the meaning of this remarkable Greek word (*stauros*) is critical in coming to an honest conclusion concerning the instrument of the Messiah's death.

The word *stauros* literally means a "post" or "stake." Vine's Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words, Vol. 1, p. 256 indicates that *stauros* "denotes, primarily, an upright pale or stake" According to the prominent scholar E. W. Bullinger (1837-1913), *stauros* "never means two pieces of timber placed across one another, but always one piece alone" (see: Companion Bible Appendix 162). Mr. Bullinger went on to state: "There is nothing in the Greek of the N.T. even to imply two pieces of timber." Bullinger's conclusion is supported by the meaning of the Greek verb *stauroo* ("to drive stakes"). Therefore, it would certainly appear that the "cross" on which Jesus was crucified was actually an upright beam as opposed to the traditional "T" as so many assume.

A Common Argument

Some have argued that the words recorded by the apostle John when describing Jesus' execution prove that the Messiah carried an actual cross on the way to Golgotha before collapsing in exhaustion. After all, this beloved apostle seems to use the term "cross" in his narrative. Notice what John writes.

And He bearing His cross went forth into a place called the place of a skull, which is called in Hebrew Golgotha. (Jn. 19:17)

At first glance it would appear that John called the instrument of Jesus' death a "cross." However, let us examine this verse closely to determine what is truly being said. The Greek word for "cross" used by John when chronicling this moment in the life of the Messiah is, once again, *stauros*. As was mentioned earlier, *stauros* is not a cross as one thinks of it today. It is in fact a beam

or pole.

According to John, what was taking place at this point in Jesus' execution was a practice that was unspeakably cruel and degrading. Here, the condemned is forced by his executioner to carry the very object that would be used in his death. This is similar to what was done by the Nazis in WW II when they would force their victims to dig their own graves before being executed. However, although what happened to the Messiah was gruesome and barbaric, it actually helps to prove a point concerning the "cross" on which He hung.

Methods of Crucifixion

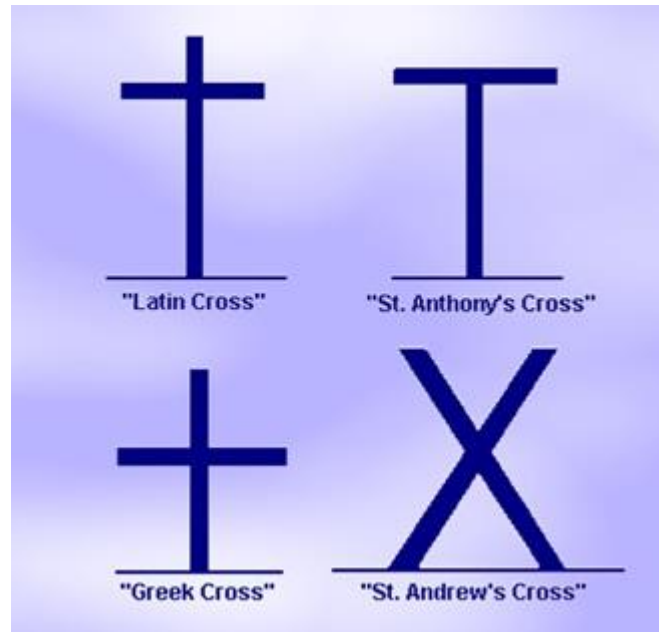
At this point it is important to understand that crucifixions in ancient Rome may actually have employed more than one method. According to Wayne Blank in an article titled Cross or Stake published on his website, Daily Bible Study, there were actually four types of crosses used during Roman crucifixions. Mr. Blank describes them as follows:

The "Latin Cross," or *crux immissa*, is the traditional cross that is most often portrayed in illustrations and in "crucifixes." It was generally assumed that because a sign was nailed to the post above Jesus (John 19:19), there must have been a section of upright post above the horizontal beam.

The "St. Anthony's Cross," or *crux commissa*, was actually the most commonly used cross by the Romans for crucifixions. The upright post, which was notched at the top, was already in place. The executed man was tied or nailed to the cross-section, which was then simply lifted up and set into the notch at the top of the upright post. From an engineering point of view, as a reader pointed out to me (thank you Bruce), this was probably the most quickly and easily assembled - and also the strongest, because the weight of the condemned man was drawing down directly into the notch, where it couldn't go anywhere, unlike the traditional cross that had the cross section fastened to the side of the post, which could much more easily pull away. And, since the condemned man hung down below the level of the horizontal beam, there was still plenty of room for a sign to be nailed above his head.

The "Greek Cross" had equal-length vertical and horizontal sections.

The "Saint Andrew's Cross," or *crux decussata*, was shaped like the letter X, with the two bottom legs set into the ground.



As is clearly visible, each of these representations involves two beams to be used during Roman crucifixions. However, when it comes to Jesus' crucifixion each of these methods clearly seem to contradict the Biblical record that states the Messiah was executed on a *stauros* (one beam). As was mentioned earlier *stauros* means "stake" not "cross." This being the case, can one know for certain how Jesus was crucified? Although most professing Christians believe the Messiah died on a cross, a stronger case can be made that he actually died on an upright beam. There are two reasons to draw this conclusion. The first relates to the protocol involving how a "two beam" cross was carried to the execution site. The second relates to an event that occurred 1500 years prior to Jesus' death. Let us examine the first point.

Bearing His Cross

One thing all authorities can agree on is that whatever was used to crucify the Messiah, its weight was truly great. Some scholars have estimated the weight of an entire two piece cross to be between 200 and 300 pounds. The main beam would weigh between 125 and 175 pounds with the cross beam bearing the balance of the weight. Furthermore, the victim who would die on such an instrument would only be required to carry the "tau" or cross beam, which alone weighed anywhere from 75 to 125 pounds (see: *The Passion of Jesus Christ* by Fr. William Saunders, Dean of the Notre Dame Graduate School of Christendom, as published in the *Arlington Catholic Herald* 1998). But why is this fact important in determining which method of crucifixion Jesus experienced? The answer: PLENTY! And that answer is revealed in the Messiah's own words.

The book of Matthew records a time when Jesus was preparing to send His disciples out to proclaim the gospel. When doing so

He warned them of the impending persecution they would most assuredly face (Mt. 10:16-23). Jesus then made an extraordinary pronouncement that has gone unnoticed by the vast majority of Christians today. Jesus said:

And he that takes not his cross and follows after Me is not worthy of me (Mt. 10:38)

With these words, Jesus was declaring to His disciples that those who are called must be willing to accept ALL the potential persecution that comes with being His disciple. They must be willing to bear their “cross” (stauros).

But it is possible there was something even more compelling in the Messiah’s words. Something that may very well have declared that He knew His crucifixion would be on an upright beam (stauros). Consider the following: If Jesus was crucified on a literal two beam or “Tau cross”, He would have contradicted His own words. This is because He would only have taken up part of His cross as opposed to the entire instrument of His death. Does anyone honestly believe this is what He did? Furthermore, does anyone honestly believe Jesus was exhorting His followers to only bear part of their cross and to follow him. In other words, if the persecution gets too tough you don’t have to endure it because I only told you to bear part of your cross.

The gospel writers most assuredly declared that Jesus carried every ounce of the horrible object that would be used in His execution. The Messiah carried a stauros, and His words declare that truth. Furthermore, His words may have been more than simply an exhortation. They may actually have been consciously prophetic. In other words it is possible that Jesus was intentionally revealing the specific type of crucifixion He would go through. Although this is conjecture, it is very possible and some renderings of this verse bear this out. Consider the words of *The Complete Jewish Bible*.

And anyone who does not take up his execution-stake and follow me is not worthy of me. (Matthew 10:38)

Paul and the Crucifixion

The apostle Paul was the most prolific author in the early New Testament Church. Additionally, he was a brilliant scholar who was thoroughly familiar with the traditions of the Jews. When writing to the churches in Galatia Paul adds some keen insight into the true instrument on which the Savior of the world was crucified.

Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us for it is written, cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree. (Gal. 3:13)

In this verse, Paul is stating that our justification to God is not achieved by technically keeping the law, but rather by humbling our hearts and minds which drive our obedience. The point here is that God wants His children to see His law for what it truly is and

to LOVE its purpose. But this great apostle revealed much more in this verse. The word “tree” used by him comes from the Greek word xulon, pronounced zoolon (Strong’s Concordance # 3586). It is used 5 times in the Bible referring to Christ’s sacrifice (Ac. 5:30; 10:39; 13:29; Gal. 3:13 and 1Pe. 2:24). According to Strong’s, Xulon means by implication “a stick, club, tree, staff...” in other words a piece of timber that is upright – never a “T” cross. Xulon, like stauros, refers to a tree or a beam, not to a two part cross. The fact that this word is used to describe the same event (Christ’s crucifixion) as the word stauros, should be proof enough that its meaning is the same. For why would Paul contradict the gospel writers?

Another Mistranslation

When describing the death of the Messiah, all four gospels record that Pontus Pilate ordered Jesus’ “crimes” to be displayed for all to see. They were to be placed above Him as He suffered the final hours of His life (Mt. 27:37, Mk. 15:26, Lk.23:38, Jn. 19:19). John’s gospel is the only one of the four that refers to this instrument as a “cross”. However, once again these were NOT John’s actual words, but rather the words of translators. The Greek words found on the earliest manuscripts use the term stauros when describing Jesus’ crucifixion. Therefore, the proper translation of John’s account, based on the true definition of the word stauros, should be: “Now Pilate wrote a title and put it on the beam” (Jn.19:19).

A second Reason: God foresees the Crucifixion on a Stake

The book of Numbers records an event, which took place while the children of Israel wandered in the desert. At this time they began to murmur and complain about their circumstances. Their discontent became so intense they actually proclaimed that slavery in Egypt was better than freedom under God (Num. 21:4-5). When God heard their complaining, He was furious. As a result He infested their camp with poisonous snakes whose bite caused many deaths (verse 6). It didn’t take long for the Israelites to realize they had brought this calamity on themselves. Therefore, they appealed to Moses to ask God to deliver them from this affliction. The Eternal’s remedy was very telling and would foreshadow the biggest sacrifice in the history of man.

God instructed Moses to “get a fiery serpent and set it upon a pole” (Num.21: 8). He then informed Moses that anyone who is bitten by a snake and looks upon the serpent would be healed. Notice what God did not tell Moses. He did not tell him to put the snake on a “cross.” He specifically commanded him to put it on a POLE.

The imagery in this event is truly remarkable. Here, the serpent is a type of Jesus Christ. The pole is a type of the stauros He was crucified on. The bite represents sin and its consequences. The deliverance from death comes by looking upon the serpent just as deliverance from eternal death comes by looking to and claiming the sacrifice of the Messiah. But some may wonder why a serpent

would represent the Lamb of God. After all, doesn't this creature represent Satan? Why would God ever have it picture His own Son?

The scriptures declare that at the end of His life, Jesus became sin. He became everything that is detestable and destructive. This is because at some moment as He hung on that stauros, all the evil mankind has ever perpetrated was conveyed to Him. Imagine how horrible this must have been. But Jesus accepted this burden. He bore this stake. All of it! As a result of this immense sacrifice the curse of sin, which is death, could be removed and life could be restored. Jesus was set on a stauros so that all mankind may look to Him and live. This is a fact that even He acknowledged.

And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up. (John 3:14).

Here Jesus is declaring that His body will be suspended for all to see just as the serpent was suspended for all the Israelites to see. Additionally, Jesus' words make it clear that it was not by accident that God instructed Moses to place a serpent on a pole. He knew exactly what he was doing. At this point, it is interesting to note that today the image of a serpent on a stake is used by physicians as a symbol of their work. Additionally, the image used is always rendered as a single upright pole with a snake on it. Not a cross.

Furthermore, God was well aware of the gory details of that future day at Golgotha. This is why every Bible scripture that details the image of this monumental event uses the word POLE OR STAKE when describing it. This is why the Apostle Paul referred to it as a Xulon (Gal. 3:13). This is why all four gospels use the word "*stauros*" when describing Jesus' crucifixion.

The apostles knew exactly what the Romans used to humiliate Jesus, and they described it in the Greek language as a stake (stauros), not a cross. If Christ died on a cross they would have described simply a cross. After all, the cross was nothing new to them for they understood its roots in paganism.

How Did the Cross Become "Christian"?

So if the Greek word for "cross" actually means a "stake" or "post", how did it get changed to "cross"? What is the history behind this distortion? How did this term (stauros) become so corrupted? And how did this deception grow to a point to where it touches the pages of almost every Bible? To answer these questions, one must take a brief tour of 3rd and 4th century Roman history.

By the middle of the 3rd century the Roman Catholic Church had grown in prominence and influence. This great religion would play a key roll in the introduction of paganism into Christianity. At this point a unique marriage between church and state was about to play out. The principal player in this marriage was Flavius Valerius Constantinus. Constantine would ascend to the throne of

Western Rome in 306 A.D. But his position was threatened by his brother-in-law Marcus Aurelius Valerius Maxentius who had also been proclaimed emperor that same year. History reveals that Maxentius was officially recognized as the senior emperor in 308. This did not settle well with Constantine

Meanwhile, in a move intended to unite the empire, Constantine attempted to consolidate its faith and he chose Christianity to be the glue. The pagans throughout the empire initially resisted especially when it came to their holidays. They eventually consented and were received into the church because they were for the most part permitted to retain their pagan signs and symbols. However one event influenced Rome's move toward Catholicism more than any other and ironically it involved a "cross." This event also solidified a place in history for one of Rome's most famous rulers. What follows is the story of that event.

The Battle at Milvian Bridge

As a divided Rome struggled to maintain its prominence, the bitterness between Constantine and Maxentius intensified. Open hostilities eventually broke out in 312 A.D. and culminated in one of history's most famous battles. The battle at Milvian Bridge is recognized more for what took place the day before than the battle itself. Accounts of this event vary. This is one of them.

As Constantine was marching from France into Italy, with Rome as his intended goal he knew that his impending battle against Maxentius was likely to either exalt or ruin him. He also knew that victory would help decide the prospects of converting pagans to Christianity and thus the future of the empire. After arriving at the Milvian Bridge, Constantine realized he had made a horrible miscalculation – one that seriously threatened victory. In an effort to defend Rome from its invaders Maxentius had amassed an army that was several times greater than that commanded by Constantine. Some sources say the advantage was 10-to-1 in Maxentius' favor. Constantine now had a tough challenge ahead of him. However it was then that he had what can only be called a "timely" vision.

In the late afternoon of October 27th, with both armies preparing for battle, Constantine reportedly had a vision as he looked toward the setting sun. In this vision, the Greek letters XP ("Chi-Rho", the first two letters of "Christ") intertwined along with a cross and appeared emblazoned on the sun, along with the inscription "In Hoc Signo Vincas" —Latin for "Under this sign, you will conquer." Emboldened by this epiphany, Constantine immediately ordered that the symbol be placed on his soldiers' shields.

Of course, the fortunes of the war quickly changed and Constantine won the battle. Soon thereafter he would dedicate his energy to unifying Rome under a common religion. The chief symbol of that faith would be the cross. Those who agreed were blessed by the Empire; those who disagreed and held to the truth

were hunted down and killed.

Embracing Paganism

But why was it so important to change a stake or tree into a cross? What made this particular image so important? On the surface, the change to defining both words (*stauros* and *xulon*) as “cross” was a small one. A cross, after all, is just two pieces of wood nailed together. How could that make any difference? While it may seem like a little thing, it was this precise change that allowed pagans to keep their religion in tact and still “embrace” (at least on the surface) this new faith. They already worshiped the Tau (t) symbol, and the institution of the “cross” as Christianity’s great icon allowed them to continue the practice. In a sense they were just putting new wine in old wineskins (Mk.2:22).

Why It Matters

As a Christian we are told in 1 Thessalonians 5:21 to prove all things. When Paul wrote these words he wasn’t just offering them up as a suggestion. He knew the destructive power of a lie. Furthermore, he knew that the greatest defense against deception was TRUTH! Now just consider a few of the areas where Satan has twisted the truth. The great dragon is the master deceiver! And what great pleasure it must give him when he sees potential children of God embracing the pagan symbol of the cross. This is why Satan corrupted the language translators use when describing Jesus’ death. As a result honest believers have been deceived into cherishing one of the most prominent fixtures of the Babylonian world. Catholics cross themselves every time they pass a church. Many wear this graven image to profess they are true believers of God. Deaths on roadways and intersections are marked with white wooded crosses. We should not follow blindly such symbols.

Verdict

Although arguments for Jesus being crucified on a two beam cross are interesting, the more compelling case clearly indicates that our Savior was crucified on an upright stake. We base this not on the influences of paganism but on how God and the inspired apostles described the greatest act of love in the history of the universe. Jesus was crucified on a *stauros*. It is because of this, that he became accursed for us. He died to wipe away all our sins, and it behooves us to remember His death and not replace it with the cheap pagan rituals of ancient cultures. We should know better.

Furthermore, perhaps we should be asking ourselves a bigger question. Why would a true follower of God’s Son duplicate a practice that filled the pagan world. Why wear a cross, or a stake, or anything else to picture this great moment in human history. Such a practice doesn’t honor Christ. It actually insults Him. Perhaps the following words express it best.

Most people in Christendom believe that Jesus was killed on a two-beamed cross. They have made the idolatrous worship of

icons representing such a device a central part of their form of religion. The Bible teaches that the instrument of execution was a simple stake. Thus the word rarely comes up in theocratic speech except in discussions of false religious beliefs. Persons who wear crosses around their necks should ask themselves: if Jesus Christ had been executed by firing squad or in an electric chair, would people wear little gold rifles or gold chairs as jewelry? If not, then why do they wear what they think was used to torture him to death as jewelry? (American English Hacker Theocratese)

That is what we ask you today