I'm not a bot

Andrew McGowan December 17, 2024 301 Comments 725703 views On December 25, Christians around the world will gather to celebrate Jesus birth. Joyful carols, special liturgies, brightly wrapped gifts, festive foodsthese all characterize the feast today, at least in the northern hemisphere. But just how did the Christmas festival originate? How did December 25 come to be associated with Jesus birthday?A blanket of snow covers the little town of Bethlehem, in Pieter Bruegels oil painting from 1566. Although Jesus birth is celebrated every year on December 25, Luke and the other gospel writers offer no hint about the specific time of year he was born. Photo: Scala/Art Resource, NY.The Bible offers few clues: Celebrations of Jesus Nativity are not mentioned in the Gospels or Acts; the date is not given, not even the time of year. The biblical reference to shepherds tending their flocks at night when they hear the news of Jesus birth (Luke 2:8) might suggest the spring lambing season; in the cold month of December, on the other hand, sheep might well have been corralled. Yet most scholars would urge caution about extracting such a precise but incidental detail from a narrative whose focus is theological rather than calendrical.The extrabiblical evidence from the first and second century is equally spare: There is no mention of birth celebrations in the writings of early Christian writers such as Irenaeus (c. 130200) or Tertullian (c. 160225). Origen of Alexandria (c. 165264) goes so far as to mock Roman celebrations of birth anniversaries, dismissing them as pagan practicesa strong indication that Jesus birth was not marked with similar festivities at that place and time.1 As far as we can tell, Christmas was not celebrated at all at this point.This stands in sharp contrast to the very early traditions surrounding Jesus last days. Each of the Four Gospels provides detailed information about the time of Jesus death. According to John, Jesus is crucified just as the Passover lambs are being sacrificed. This would have occurred on the 14th of the Hebrew month of Nisan, just before the Jewish holiday began at sundown (considered the beginning of the 15th day because in the Hebrew calendar, days begin at sundown). In Matthew, Mark and Luke, however, the Last Supper is held after sundown, on the beginning of the 15th. Jesus is crucified the next morningstill, the 15th.a FREE ebook: The First Christmas: The Story of Jesus Birth in History and Tradition. Download now. Easter, a much earlier development than Christmas, was simply the gradual Christian reinterpretation of Passover in terms of Jesus Passion. Its observance could even be implied in the New Testament (1 Corinthians 5:78: Our paschal lamb, Christ, has been sacrificed. Therefore let us celebrate the festival); it was certainly a distinctively Christian feast by the mid-second century C.E., when the apocryphal text known as the Epistle to the Apostles has Jesus instruct his disciples to make commemoration of [his] death, that is, the Passover.Jesus ministry, miracles, Passion and Resurrection were often of most interest to first- and early-second-century C.E. Christian writers. But over time, Jesus origins would become of increasing concern. We can begin to see this shift already in the New Testament. The earliest writingsPaul and Markmake no mention of Jesus birth. The Gospels of Matthew and Luke provide well-known but quite different accounts of the eventalthough neither specifies a date. In the second century C.E., further details of Jesus birth and childhood are related in apocryphal writings such as the Infancy Gospel of Thomas and the Proto-Gospel of James.b These texts provide everything from the names of Jesus grandparents to the details of his educationbut not the date of his birth.Finally, in about 200 C.E., a Christian teacher in Egypt makes reference to the date Jesus was born. According to Clement of Alexandria, several different days had been proposed by various Christian groups. Surprising as it may seem, Clement doesnt mention December 25 at all. Clement writes: There are those who have determined not only the year of our Lords birth, but also the day; and they say that it took place in the 28th year of Augustus, and in the 25th day of [the Egyptian month] Pachon [May 20 in our calendar] And treating of His Passion, with very great accuracy, some say that it took place in the 16th year of Tiberius, on the 25th of Phamenoth [March 21]; and others on the 25th of Pharmuthi [April 21] and others say that on the 19th of Pharmuthi [April 15] the Savior suffered. Further, others say that He was born on the 24th or 25th of Pharmuthi [April 20 or 21].2Clearly there was great uncertainty, but also a considerable amount of interest, in dating Jesus birth in the late second century. By the fourth century, however, we find references to two dates that were widely recognizedand now also celebratedas Jesus birthday: December 25 in the western Roman Empire and January 6 in the East (especially in Egypt and Asia Minor). The modern Armenian church continues to celebrate Christmas on January 6; for most Christians, however, December 25 would prevail, while January 6 eventually came to be known as the Feast of the Epiphany, commemorating the arrival of the magi in Bethlehem. The period between became the holiday season later known as the 12 days of Christmas.The earliest mention of December 25 as Jesus birthday comes from a mid-fourth-century Roman almanac that lists the death dates of various Christian bishops and martyrs. The first date listed, December 25, is marked: natus Christus in Betleem Judeae: Christ was born in Bethlehem of Judea.3 In about 400 C.E., Augustine of Hippo mentions a local dissident Christian group, the Donatists, who apparently kept Christmas festivals on December 25, but refused to celebrate the Epiphany on January 6, regarding it as an innovation. Since the Donatist group only emerged during the persecution under Diocletian in 312 C.E. and then remained stubbornly attached to the practices of that moment in time, they seem to represent an older North African Christian tradition.In the East, January 6 was at first not associated with the magi alone, but with the Christmas story as a whole.So, almost 300 years after Jesus was born, we finally find people observing his birth in mid-winter. But how had they settled on the dates December 25 and January 6?There are two theories today: one extremely popular, the other less often heard outside scholarly circles (though far more ancient).4The most loudly touted theory about the origins of the Christmas date(s) is that it was borrowed from pagan celebrations. The Romans had their mid-winter Saturnalia festival in late December; barbarian peoples of northern and western Europe kept holidays at similar times. To top it off, in 274 C.E., the Roman emperor Aurelian established a feast of the birth of Sol Invictus (the Unconquered Sun), on December 25. Christmas, the argument goes, is really a spin-off from these pagan solar festivals. According to this theory, early Christians deliberately chose these dates to encourage the spread of Christmas and Christianity throughout the Roman world: If Christmas looked like a pagan holiday, more pagans would be open to both the holiday and the God whose birth it celebrated. FREE ebook: Gabriels Revelation. Discover the meaning of the inscription of Gabriels Revelation on a first-century B.C. Dead Sea Scroll in Stone. Despite its popularity today, this theory of Christmass origins has its problems. It is not found in any ancient Christian writings, for one thing. Christian authors of the time do note a connection between the solstice and Jesus birth: The church father Ambrose (c. 339397), for example, described Christ as the true sun, who outshone the fallen gods of the old order. But early Christian writers never hint at any recent calendrical engineering; they clearly dont think the date was chosen by the church. Rather they see the coincidence as a providential sign, as natural proof that God had selected Jesus over the false pagan gods.Its not until the 12th century that we find the first suggestion that Jesus birth celebration was deliberately set at the time of pagan feasts. A marginal note on a manuscript of the writings of the Syriac biblical commentator Dionysius bar-Salibi states that in ancient times the Christmas holiday was actually shifted from January 6 to December 25 so that it fell on the same date as the pagan Sol Invictus holiday.5 In the 18th and 19th centuries, Bible scholars spurred on by the new study of comparative religions latched on to this idea.6 They claimed that because the early Christians didnt know when Jesus was born, they simply assimilated the pagan solstice festival for their own purposes, claiming it as the time of the Messiahs birth and celebrating it accordingly.More recent studies have shown that many of the holidays modern trappings do reflect pagan customs borrowed much later, as Christianity expanded into northern and western Europe. The Christmas tree, for example, has been linked with late medieval druidic practices. This has only encouraged modern audiences to assume that the date, too, must be pagan.There are problems with this popular theory, however, as many scholars recognize. Most significantly, the first mention of a date for Christmas (c. 200) and the earliest celebrations that we know about (c. 250300) come in a period when Christians were not borrowing heavily from pagan traditions of such an obvious character.Granted, Christian belief and practice were not formed in isolation. Many early elements of Christian worshipincluding eucharistic meals, meals honoring martyrs and much early Christian funerary artwould have been quite comprehensible to pagan observers. Yet, in the first few centuries C.E., the persecuted Christian minority was greatly concerned with distancing itself from the larger, public pagan religious observances, such as sacrifices, games and holidays. This was still true as late as the violent persecutions of the Christians conducted by the Roman emperor Diocletian between 303 and 312 C.E.This would change only after Constantine converted to Christianity. From the mid-fourth century on, we do find Christians deliberately adapting and Christianizing pagan festivals. A famous proponent of this practice was Pope Gregory the Great, who, in a letter written in 601 C.E. to a Christian missionary in Britain, recommended that local pagan temples not be destroyed but be converted into churches, and that pagan festivals be celebrated as feasts of Christian martyrs. At this late point, Christmas may well have acquired some pagan trappings. But we dont have evidence of Christians adopting pagan festivals in the third century, at which point dates for Christmas were established. Thus, it seems unlikely that the date was simply selected to correspond with pagan solar festivals.The December 25 feast seems to have existed before 312before Constantine and his conversion, at least. As we have seen, the Donatist Christians in North Africa seem to have known it from before that time. Furthermore, in the mid- to late fourth century, church leaders in the eastern Empire concerned themselves not with introducing a celebration of Jesus birthday, but with the addition of the December date to their traditional celebration on January 6.7 Read Andrew McGowans article The Hungry Jesus, in which he challenges the tradition that Jesus was a welcoming host at meals, in Bible History Daily. There is another way to account for the origins of Christmas on December 25: Strange as it may seem, the key to dating Jesus birth may lie in the dating of Jesus death at Passover. This view was first suggested to the modern world by French scholar Louis Duchesne in the early 20th century and fully developed by American Thomas Talley in more recent years.8 But they were certainly not the first to note a connection between the traditional date of Jesus death and his birth.The baby Jesus flies down from heaven on the back of a cross, in this detail from Master Bertrams 14th-century Annunciation scene. Jesus conception carried with it the promise of salvation through his death. It may be no coincidence, then, that the early church celebrated Jesus conception and death on the same calendar day: March 25, exactly nine months before December 25. Kunsthalle, Hamburg/Bridgeman Art Library, NYAround 200 C.E. Tertullian of Carthage reported the calculation that the 14th of Nisan (the day of the crucifixion according to the Gospel of John) in the year Jesus diedc was equivalent to March 25 in the Roman (solar) calendar.9 March 25 is, of course, nine months before December 25; it was later recognized as the Feast of the Annunciationthe commemoration of Jesus conception.10 Thus, Jesus was believed to have been conceived and crucified on the same day of the year. Exactly nine months later, Jesus was born, on December 25.dThis idea appears in an anonymous Christian treatise titled On Solstices and Equinoxes, which appears to come from fourth-century North Africa. The treatise states: Therefore our Lord was conceived on the eighth of the kalends of April in the month of March [March 25], which is the day of the passion of the Lord and of his conception. For on that day he was conceived on the same he suffered.11 Based on this, the treatise dates Jesus birth to the winter solstice.Augustine, too, was familiar with this association. In On the Trinity (c. 399419) he writes: For he [Jesus] is believed to have been conceived on the 25th of March, upon which day also he suffered; so the womb of the Virgin, in which he was conceived, where no one of mortals was begotten, corresponds to the new grave in which he was buried, wherein was never man laid, neither before him nor since. But he was born, according to tradition, upon December the 25th.12 Learn about the magi in art and literature in Witnessing the Divine by Robin M. Jensen, originally published in Bible Review and now available for free in Bible History Daily. In the East, too, the dates of Jesus conception and death were linked. But instead of working from the 14th of Nisan in the Hebrew calendar, the easterners used the 14th of the first spring month (Artemisios) in their local Greek calendarApril 6 to us. April 6 is, of course, exactly nine months before January 6the eastern date for Christmas. In the East, too, we have evidence that April was associated with Jesus conception and crucifixion. Bishop Epiphanius of Salamis writes that on April 6, The lamb was shut up in the spotless womb of the holy virgin, he who took away and takes away in perpetual sacrifice the sins of the world.13 Even today, the Armenian Church celebrates the Annunciation in early April (on the 7th, not the 6th) and Christmas on January 6.eThus, we have Christians in two parts of the world calculating Jesus birth on the basis that his death and conception took place on the same day (March 25 or April 6) and coming up with two close but different results (December 25 and January 6).Connecting Jesus conception and death in this way will certainly seem odd to modern readers, but it reflects ancient and medieval understandings of the whole of salvation being bound up together. One of the most poignant expressions of this belief is found in Christian art. In numerous paintings of the angels Annunciation to Marythe moment of Jesus conceptionthe baby Jesus is shown gliding down from heaven on or with a small cross (see photo above of detail from Master Bertrams Annunciation scene); a visual reminder that the conception brings the promise of salvation through Jesus death.The notion that creation and redemption should occur at the same time of year is also reflected in ancient Jewish tradition, recorded in the Talmud. The Babylonian Talmud preserves a dispute between two early-second-century C.E. rabbis who share this view, but disagree on the date: Rabbi Eliezer states: In Nisan the world was created; in Nisan the Patriarchs were born; on Passover Isaac was born and in Nisan they [our ancestors] will be redeemed in time to come. (The other rabbi, Joshua, dates these same events to the following month, Tishri.)14 Thus, the dates of Christmas and Epiphany may well have resulted from Christian theological reflection on such chronologies: Jesus would have been conceived on the same date he died, and born nine months later.15In the end we are left with a question: How did December 25 become Christmas? We cannot be entirely sure. Elements of the festival that developed from the fourth century until modern times may well derive from pagan traditions. Yet the actual date might really derive more from Judaismfrom Jesus death at Passover, and from the rabbinic notion that great things might be expected, again and again, at the same time of the yearthan from paganism. Then again, in this notion of cycles and the return of Gods redemption, we may perhaps also be touching upon something that the pagan Romans who celebrated Sol Invictus, and many other peoples since, would have understood and claimed for their own, too.16 Andrew McGowan is Dean and President of the Berkeley Divinity School at Yale and McFaddin Professor of Anglican Studies at Yale Divinity School. Formerly, he was Warden and President of Trinity College at the University of Melbourne, and Joan Munro Professor of Historical Theology in Trinitys Theological School within the University of Divinity. His work on early Christian thought and history includes Ascetic Eucharists: Food and Drink in Early Christian Ritual Meals (Oxford: Clarendon, 1999) and Ancient Christian Worship: Early Church Practices in Social, Historical, and Theological Perspective (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014). Notesa. See Jonathan Klawans, Was Jesus Last Supper a Seder? Bible Review, October 2001.b. See the following Bible Review articles: David R. Cartlidge, The Christian Apocrypha: Preserved in Art, Bible Review, June 1997; Ronald F. Hock and David R. Cartlidge, The Favored One, Bible Review, June 2001; and Charles W. Hedrick, The 34 Gospels, Bible Review, June 2002.c. For more on dating the year of Jesus birth, see Leonora Neville, Origins: Fixing the Millennium, Archaeology Odyssey, January/February 2000.d. The ancients were familiar with the 9-month gestation period based on the observance of womens menstrual cycles, pregnancies and miscarriages.e. In the West (and eventually everywhere), the Easter celebration was later shifted from the actual day to the following Sunday. The insistence of the eastern Christians in keeping Easter on the actual 14th day caused a major debate within the church, with the easterners sometimes referred to as the Quartodecimans, or Fourteenthers.1. Origen, Homily on Leviticus 8.2. Clement, Stromateis 1.21.145. In addition, Christians in Clements native Egypt seem to have known a commemoration of Jesus baptismsometimes understood as the moment of his divine choice, and hence as an alternate incarnation storyon the same date (Stromateis 1.21.146). See further on this point Thomas J. Talley, Origins of the Liturgical Year, 2nd ed. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991), pp. 118120, drawing on Roland H. Bainton, Basilidian Chronology and New Testament Interpretation, Journal of Biblical Literature 42 (1923), pp. 81134; and now especially Gabriele Winkler, The Appearance of the Light at the Baptism of Jesus and the Origins of the Feast of the Epiphany, in Maxwell Johnson, ed., Between Memory and Hope: Readings on the Liturgical Year (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000), pp. 291347.3. The Philocalian Calendar.4. Scholars of liturgical history in the English-speaking world are particularly skeptical of the solstice connection; see Susan K. Roll, The Origins of Christmas: The State of the Question, in Between Memory and Hope: Readings on the Liturgical Year (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000), pp. 273290, especially pp. 289290.5. A gloss on a manuscript of Dionysius Bar Salibi, d. 1171; see Talley, Origins, pp. 101102.6. Prominent among these was Paul Ernst Jablonski; on the history of scholarship, see especially Roll, The Origins of Christmas, pp. 277283.7. For example, Gregory of Nazianzen, Oratio 38; John Chrysostom, In Diem Natalem.8. Louis Duchesne, Origines du culte Chrtien, 5th ed. (Paris: Thorin et Fontemoing, 1925), pp. 275279; and Talley, Origins.9. Tertullian, Adversus Iudaeos 8.10. There are other relevant texts for this element of argument, including Hippolytus and the (pseudo-Cyprianic) De pascha computus; see Talley, Origins, pp. 86, 9091.11. De solstitia et aequinoctia conceptionis et nativitatis domini nostri iesu christi et iohannis baptistae.12. Augustine, Sermon 202.13. Epiphanius is quoted in Talley, Origins, p. 98.14. b. Rosh Hashanah 10b11a.15. Talley, Origins, pp. 8182.16. On the two theories as false alternatives, see Roll, Origins of Christmas. How December 25 Became Christmas by Andrew McGowan originally appeared in Bible Review, December 2002. The article was first republished in Bible History Daily in December 2012. Related reading in Bible History Daily:Did Jesus Exist? Searching for Evidence Beyond the BibleWhere Was Jesus Born?Christmas Stories in Christian ApocryphaHas the Childhood Home of Jesus Been Found?All-Access members, read more in the BAS Library:How Early Christians Viewed the Birth of Jesus Different Ways of Looking at the Birth of Jesus The Scandal of Jesus Birth The Magi and the Star O Little Town ofNazareth? How Babies Were Made in Jesus Time Not a BAS Library or All-Access Member yet? Join today. How the cross became Christianitys most popular symbol Steven Shisley January 26, 2025 34 Comments 162884 views Throughout the world, images of the cross adorn the walls and steeples of churches. For some Christians, the cross is part of their daily attire worn around their necks. Sometimes the cross even adorns the body of a Christian in permanent ink. In Egypt, among other countries, for example, Christians wear a tattoo of the cross on their wrists. And for some Christians, each year during the beginning of Lent, they receive the cross on their foreheads in ash.Clearly, today the cross is accepted as the most popular symbol of Christianity. But, interestingly, most scholars believe that early Christians did not use the cross as an image of their religion because crucifixion evoked the shameful death of a slave or criminal.1Scholars believe that the first surviving public image of Jesuss crucifixion was on the fifth-century wooden doors of the Basilica of Santa Sabina, which is located on the Aventine Hill in Rome.2 Since it took approximately 400 years for Jesuss crucifixion to become an acceptable public image, scholars have traditionally believed that this means the cross did not originally function as a symbol for Christians.3Jesus and the cross: Jesuss crucifixion is displayed on the fifth-century C.E. wooden doors of the Basilica of Santa Sabina in Rome. Photo: Jim Forest.So how, then, did the cross become the preeminent symbol of Christianity? The Cross in the Roman WorldThe word cross was offensive to Romans. One Roman insulted another by using it on a graffito discovered in the Stabian baths of Pompeii: May you be nailed to the cross! Classical texts similarly use the term cross in curses. The Roman writer Plautus, for instance, uses the phrase go to an evil cross as slang for go to hell (e.g., Pseudolus 331).4 In fact, even the Latin word for cross (crux) sounded harsh to the ears, according to St. Augustine (De Dialectica 10.10).In 70 B.C.E., Cicero accused a former governor of Sicily named Gaius Verres of crucifying a Roman citizen. According to Verres, the Roman citizen named P. Gavius was guilty of espionage. Cicero reports that while Gavius was flogged in the marketplace, the only sounds from his lips were the words, I am a Roman citizen. Despite his claim of Roman citizenship, a cross was prepared for him. Yes, a cross, says Cicero, was prepared for this broken sufferer, who had never seen such an accursed thing till then (Against Verres 2.5.162).5 Worst of all, Verres ordered for Gavius to be crucified on the shore facing the Italian mainland since he claimed Roman citizenship. This incident recorded in Ciceros speech against Verres reveals that, at least for Roman elites, crucifixion was extremely rare to witness or suffer. Easter: Exploring the Resurrection of JesusIn this free eBook, expert Bible scholars offer in-depth reflections on the resurrection. Unlike the Roman elites, slaves and members of the lower class were unfortunately very familiar with the cross. In a play by Plautus, a slave comments that his death on the cross is inevitable: I know that the cross will be my tomb; there my ancestors have been laid to rest, my father, grandfather, great-grandfather, great-great-grandfather (The Braggart Soldier 372373). Slaves, in fact, could be crucified for even the smallest mistakes.The Romans primarily reserved crucifixion for criminals and rebellious foreigners. The first-century Jewish historian Josephus records numerous instances when the Romans crucified fractious Jews in Palestine (e.g., Wars of the Jews 2.75). Of course, when the Romans crucified rebels and criminals, the cross was more than a penalty; it was also a deterrent. For instance, the Romans crucified Spartacus and his rebellious slaves on the Appian Way for everyone to see from Capua to Rome (Appian, The Civil Wars 1.120). A long row of crosses with rebellious slaves fastened to them must have discouraged other slaves from similarly revolting against their masters.As the most extreme penalty in the Roman world, a person could suffer crucifixion in several ways. Seneca recalls seeing victims with their head down to the ground, others who had their private parts impaled, and still others with outstretched arms (De Consolatione ad Marciam 6.20.3).When not impaled, the condemned person usually carried the horizontal beam called the patibulum to the place of execution outside the city walls. Either a soldier or public executor fastened the condemned person who was naked or wearing a loincloth to the cross with ropes or nails. Material evidence suggests that a persons feet were nailed separately on each side of the vertical beam of the cross. A crucifixion image discovered in Puteoli, Italy, for instance, shows a man, who had been severely flogged, with outstretched arms and feet nailed separately to the vertical beam.The crucifixion image from Puteoli, Italy.An ankle bone pierced with a nail found at Givat ha-Mivtar likewise attests to the practice of using one nail per foot.6 Finally, after the humiliating procession to the place of execution and the preparations for crucifixion were completed, the Romans raised the cross high in the air, so as to allow people to see the condemned person die from a long distance.7The crucified ankle bone of a man named Yehohanan found at Givat ha-Mivtar is the only archaeological evidence yet found of the Roman practice of crucifixion. Photo: Israel Museum/P. Lanyi.To die on the cross was not only humiliating, but a slow and agonizing experiencesometimes lasting days. St. Augustine suggests that the purpose of crucifixion was to inflict as much pain as possible while prolonging death (Tractate 36.4 [John 8:1518]). Of course, in order to maximize the amount of pain inflicted on an individual, the Romans typically tortured the victim before fastening them to the cross.While medical theories traditionally assert that people died on the cross from asphyxia (respiratory failure), recent studies contend that the victims most likely died because of a variety of physiological factors.8 Regardless of the actual cause of death, crucifixion was a slow and excruciatingly painful death. Easter: Exploring the Resurrection of JesusIn this free eBook, expert Bible scholars offer in-depth reflections on the resurrection. Each of the Synoptic Gospels recounts that at the moment of Jesuss deepest agony as he hung on the cross, the soldiers and people in the crowd mocked him, saying, Save yourself, and come down from the cross! (Mark 15:30; Matthew 27:4044; Luke 23:3739). This sarcastic insult may certainly reflect the attitude of Jewish and Greco-Roman audiences when they first heard Paul and other early Christians preach in the first century. Simply put, their message about a crucified messiah and son of God who did not have the power to save himself from the cross seemed offensive to the Jews and foolish to Greeks and Romans (1 Corinthians 1:23).Although the very word cross was so repulsive that Cicero and other Roman elites wanted nothing to do with it, each of the Gospel writers recounts Jesuss crucifixion with astonishing detail. Jesuss death on the cross, according to Mark, is not only necessary but an example of the service required for true discipleship (8:3438). Similarly, Jesuss death on the cross is not portrayed as being shameful or humiliating in Johns Gospel; there Jesuss crucifixion is envisioned as a saving event foreshadowed by Moses when he lifted up the serpent in the wilderness (John 3:14).Despite its negative connotation to Jews, Greeks, and Romans, Paul repeatedly uses the word cross in his letters when responding to the conflicts created by his opponents (e.g., Galatians 2:1820). Interestingly, Paul may have deliberately focused on the modality of Jesuss death on the cross for at least two reasons. First, Paul most likely knew that, although his message about the cross was not going to easily appeal to his Jewish and Greco-Roman audiences, still it would certainly attract their attention. And second, the Jewish and Gentile criticism of Jesuss crucifixion may have encouraged Paul to focus even more of his attention on this gruesome subject since he believed Jesus demonstrated his selflessness, humility, and abundant love for humanity by suffering on the cross.By the end of the first century, some Christians already may have viewed the cross as a significant symbol. For example, in the last decade of the first century, the author of the Book of Revelation may have referred to the mark of the cross in the seal that the servants of God receive on their foreheads (Revelation 7:23). Thus, the Book of Revelation possibly refers to the cross as a Christological identity marker.9Christians and the Cross in the Second and Third CenturiesGreek and Roman elites continued to criticize Christians because of their veneration of the crucified Jesus in the second century. Perhaps the most explicit criticism came from the second-century Greek philosopher Celsus, who called the manner in which Jesus died the most humiliating of circumstances (On the True Doctrine 3).It was common knowledge in the second and third centurieseven among the poorer classes of the Roman Empirethat the founder of the Christian movement suffered the most shameful death as suggested by the well-known Palatine graffito discovered in the imperial training school for slaves in Rome in 1857. This graffito depicts a donkeys hands nailed to the horizontal beam of a cross. A person beneath the cross, who is dressed like a slave in a short-sleeved shirt that extends from the shoulder to a little below the waist, gazes upward at the crucified victim in adoration as suggested by the inscription: Alexamenos, worships god. Most likely, although it is not certain, the context of this graffito is one slave mocking another for worshiping the crucified Jesus. The inspiration for this satirical image of Jesuss crucifixion may trace back to the Greek and Latin authors who accused Christians, like the Jews, of worshiping a donkey.10 In any case, the graffito indicates that even the poorer social classes criticized the Christian belief in the crucified Jesus with sarcastic enjoyment.The so-called Alexamenos graffito.Although the image of Jesus on the cross was not very popular in the second and third centuries, still scholars have identified at least a few instances in which Christians depicted it. Perhaps the earliest portrayal of the cross by Christians occurred in the iconography of their papyrus manuscripts, specifically the Staurogram, or shape of the cross made by the overlapping of the Greek letters Rho and Tau ().11 A more obvious depiction of the cross is seen in a third-century gem in the British Museum, which depicts a crucified Jesus with an inscription that lists various Egyptian magical words. Furthermore, some Christians continued to mark their forehead with the image of the cross in the second and third centuries as an identity marker (e.g., Revelation 7:23; cf. Tertullian, On Crowns 3).12 Moreover, some scholars argue that the depiction of figures with outstretched arms in early Christian artwork may be the archetype representation of Jesus on the cross.13 Such a theory is supported by second- and third-century Christian texts, which mention Christians (especially martyrs) making the sign of the cross by stretching out their arms (e.g., Odes of Solomon 27; Acts of Paul and Thecla 22).This third-century C.E. gem in the British Museum depicts Jesuss crucifixion with an inscription that lists various Egyptian magical words. Photo: British Museum/CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.During the second and third centuries, Christians were aware that the cross was still what Paul calls a stumbling block for the Jews and foolishness for Greeks and Romans (1 Corinthians 1:23), and most Christians were reluctant to depict it. Nevertheless, the rhetoric of the Christian apologists, such as Justin the Martyr and Tertullian, may have encouraged at least some Christians to illustrate the cross in their art and iconography. Thus, by the end of the third century, what had once been universally a repulsive image in the ancient Mediterranean world was well on its way to becoming the preeminent symbol of Christianity. Easter: Exploring the Resurrection of JesusIn this free eBook, expert Bible scholars offer in-depth reflections on the resurrection. In his history of the Christian Church written in the fourth century, Eusebius of Caesarea recounts that the gesture of outstretched hands used by Christian martyrs in the arena represented Jesuss crucifixion (History of the Church 8.7.4). If Eusebiuss account is historically accurate, then the gesture of outstretched arms was widely recognized by Christians and non-Christians alike.Undoubtedly, though, Constantines adoption of the cross was the most important development that resulted in its becoming the preeminent symbol of Christianity.According to Eusebius, the day before the Battle of Melvian Bridge, Constantine earnestly prayed for victory against his co-emperor Maxentius. Constantines prayer was answered, and a most marvelous sign appeared to him from heaven. Eusebius relates that Constantine saw a cross of light in the sky, above the sun, bearing the inscription, Conquer by this (Life of Constantine 28). That night, Eusebius reports, Jesus explained to Constantine the meaning of the vision. Constantine was directed by Jesus to create a new banner with the symbol of the cross created by the Greek letters Chi and Rho. This well-known symbol in Christianity, which is usually referred to as the Chi-Rho (), became known as the standard of the cross. FREE ebook: Frank Moore Cross: Conversations with a Bible Scholar. Download now. According to the fifth-century Christian historian Sozomen, Constantine abolished crucifixion in special reverence for the power and victory he received because of the symbol of the cross (History of the Church 1.8). This abolishment certainly changed the Roman perception of the cross. Simply put, Constantines public endorsement of the cross changed its connotation from a repulsive device for executing slaves, foreigners, and Roman citizens of low social standing into a revered, public symbol.Constantine did not create the symbol of the cross. Rather he adopted it as a new symbol for his empire that had converted to Christianity. Of course, this means that when the artisans depicted the crucified Jesus on the wooden doors of Santa Sabina in the fifth century, the cross was no longer an offensive image. Rather the image of the cross had already transformed from an execution device to a symbol of Christianity. And soon the image of the crucifix would adorn the walls and steeples of churches throughout the world, making the cross the preeminent symbol of Christianity. Steven Shisley, who has a Ph.D. from Claremont Graduate University, is currently teaching at California Lutheran and as an online instructor at Brigham Young University, Idaho. His research focuses on early Christian worship, architecture, and art. This post first appeared in Bible History Daily in March, 2018 Notes:1. For an overview of the literature and history of crucifixion, see the excellent study by John Granger Cook, Crucifixion in the Mediterranean World (Tbingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014); also the classical study by Martin Hengel, Crucifixion (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977).2. See Allyson Everingham Sheckler and Mary Joan Winn Leith, The Crucifixion Conundrum and the Santa Sabina Doors, Harvard Theological Review 103.1 (2010), p. 67.3. See George Willard Benson, The Cross: Its History and Symbolism. An Account of the Symbol More Universal in Its Use and More Important in Its Significance Than Any Other in the World (Buffalo: George Willard Benson, 1934), pp. 2829; for another opinion, see Bruce W. Longenecker, The Cross Before Constantine: The Early Life of a Christian Symbol (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), p. 11.4. CIL 4.2082. See John Granger Cook, Envisioning Crucifixion: Light from Several Inscriptions and the Palatine Graffito, Novum Testamentum 50 (2008), p. 277, where Cook comments that this inscription might read, Get crucified, the equivalent of the English expression, Go to hell.5. Unless otherwise noted, this article uses the translations of classical texts in the Loeb Classical Library.6. The crucified Jewish man was named Yehohanan. For an analysis of his ankle bone that was pierced with a nail, see Joseph Zilas and Eliezer Sekeles, The Crucified Man from Givat Ha-Mivtar: A Reappraisal, Israel Exploration Journal 35 (1985), pp. 2227.7. See Cook, Crucifixion in the Mediterranean World, pp. 42330 for an overview of the practice of Roman crucifixion.8. See Matthew W. Maslen and Piers D. Mitchell, Medical Theories on the Cause of Death in Crucifixion, Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine 4.99 (April 2006), pp. 18788; Cook, Crucifixion in the Mediterranean World, pp. 430435.9. See Longenecker, The Cross Before Constantine, pp. 6171.10. Josephus quotes Mnaseas of Patras (second century B.C.E.) as claiming that the Jews worshiped the head of a golden donkey; see Against Apion 2.9. Also, Plutarch comments that the Jews abstained from eating the flesh of the hare because it resembled the donkey, which they worshiped; see Table Talk 4.3. Since the Romans identified Christians as a branch of Judaism, this mean that they were likewise accused of worshiping a donkey; see Minucius Felix, Octavius 9.28; Tertullian, First Apology 16.11. See Larry Hurtado, The Staurogram: Earliest Depiction of Jesuss Crucifixion, Biblical Archaeological Review, March/April 2013. Although it is debatable, some early Christians may have used the cross as a symbol in Pompeii; see Bruce W. Longenecker, The Crosses of Pompeii: Jesus Devotion in a Vesuvian Town (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2016).12. Longenecker, The Cross Before Constantine, pp. 8693.13. This is the argument of Sheckler and Leith, Crucifixion Conundrum. Related reading in Bible History DailyThe StaurogramRoman Crucifixion Methods Reveal the History of CrucifixionTour Showcases Remains of Herods Jerusalem PalacePossible Site of the Trial of JesusWhere Is Golgotha, Where Jesus Was Crucified?All-Access members, read more in the BAS LibraryCrucifixionThe Archaeological Evidence Conversion, Crucifixion and Celebration Two Questions About Crucifixion Jesus Triumphal March to Crucifixion Not a BAS Library or All-Access Member yet? Join today. The tomb of Yehohanan contains first physical evidence of crucifixion in antiquity BAS Staff August 06, 2024 8 Comments 72222 views In the history of crucifixion, the death of Jesus of Nazareth stands out as the best-known example by far. Crucifixion in antiquity was actually a fairly common punishment, but there were no known physical remains from a crucifixion. Then, in 1968, archaeologist Vassilios Tzaferis excavated a Jerusalem tomb that contained the bones of a crucified man named Yehohanan. As Tzaferis reported in BAR (see below), the discovery demonstrated the brutal reality of Roman crucifixion methods in a way that written accounts never had before.The practice of crucifixion in antiquity was brought to life as never before when the heel bones of a young man named Yehohanan were found in a Jerusalem tomb, pierced by an iron nail. The discovery shed new light on Roman crucifixion methods and began to rewrite the history of crucifixion in antiquity. Photo: Erich LessingThe Romans were not the only people to practice crucifixion in antiquity. The history of crucifixion extends as far back as the Assyrians, Phoenicians and Persians of the first millennium B.C., as well as some Greeks throughout the Hellenized world. Even so, the most detailed accounts are of Roman crucifixion methods.Initially the practice served only as a punishment and humiliation, usually for slaves, and did not necessarily result in death. As Roman crucifixion methods evolved, however, it became a means to execute foreign captives, rebels and fugitives. During times of war or rebellion, crucifixions could number in the hundreds or thousands. The convicted could sometimes hang in agony for days before expiring.Despite the long history of crucifixion in antiquity, the discovery of Yehohanans remains offered scientists the first opportunity to study the process of crucifixion and Roman crucifixion methods up close. The bones were found in an ossuary, or bone box, inscribed several times with Yehohanans name (Yehohanan son of Hagakol). This ossuary, along with several others, had been placed in a tomb complex consisting of two chambers and 12 burial niches. During the Roman period (first century B.C.first century A.D.) Jews who could afford this type of burial would lay out the dead bodies of loved ones on stone benches in rock-cut tombs. A year later, after the flesh had desiccated, the bones were collected into an ossuary and left in the tomb with those of other family members.Examination of Yehohanans bones showed one of the many Roman crucifixion methods. Both of his feet had been nailed together to the cross with a wooden plaque while his legs were bent to one side. His arm bones revealed scratches where the nails had passed between. Both legs were badly fractured, most likely from a crushing blow meant to end his suffering and bring about a faster death. Yehohanan was probably a political dissident against Roman oppression. In death his bones have helped fill in gaps in the history of crucifixion.Below, read the original report from BAR written by Vassilios Tzaferis about his excavation of the tomb of Yehohanan in Jerusalem. CrucifixionThe Archaeological Evidenceby Vassilios TzaferisFrom ancient literary sources we know that tens of thousands of people were crucified in the Roman Empire. In Palestine alone, the figure ran into the thousands. Yet until 1968 not a single victim of this horrifying method of execution had been uncovered archaeologically.In that year I excavated the only victim of crucifixion ever discovered. He was a Jew, of a good family, who may have been convicted of a political crime. He lived in Jerusalem shortly after the turn of the era and sometime before the Roman destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D.In the period following the Six Day Warwhen the Old City and East Jerusalem were newly under Israeli jurisdictiona great deal of construction was undertaken. Accidental archaeological discoveries by construction crews were frequent. When that occurred, either my colleagues at the Israel Department of Antiquities and Museums or I would be called in; part of our job was to investigate these chance discoveries.In late 1968 the then Director of the Department, Dr. Avraham Biran, asked me to check some tombs that had been found northeast of Jerusalem in an area called Givat ha-Mivtar. A crew from the Ministry of Housing had accidentally broken into some burial chambers and discovered the tombs. After we looked at the tombs, it was decided that I would excavate four of them.The tombs were part of a huge Jewish cemetery of the Second Temple period (second century B.C. to 70 A.D.), extending from Mt. Scopus in the east to the Sanhedriya tombs in the northwest. Like most of the tombs of this period, the particular tomb I will focus on here was cut, cave-like, into the soft limestone that abounds in Jerusalem. The tomb consisted of two rooms or chambers, each with burial niches.This particular tomb (which we call Tomb No. 1) was a typical Jewish tomb, just like many others found in Jerusalem. On the outside, in front of the entrance to the tomb, was a forecourt (which, unfortunately, had been badly damaged). The entrance itself was blocked by a stone slab and led to a large, carved-out cave chamber, nearly 10 feet square (Chamber A on the plan). On three sides of the chamber were stone benches, intentionally left by the carver of the chamber. The fourth wall contained two openings leading down to another, lower chamber (Chamber B on the plan) that was similar in design to the first but had no benches. When we found Chamber B, its entrance was still blocked with a large stone slab.Tomb 1 at Givat ha Mivtar had two chambers, A and B, that contained a total of 12 loculi, or burial niches. In one wall of chamber A was a large stone slab

end of the nail bent and curled. We found a bit of the olive wood (between 1 and 2 cm) on the tip of the nail. This wood had probably been forced out of the knot where the curled nail hooked into it.When it came time for the dead victim to be removed from the cross, the executioners could not pull out this nail, bent as it was within the cross. The only way to remove the body was to take an ax or hatchet and amputate the feet. Thereafter, the feet, the nail and a plaque of wood that had been fastened between the head of the nail and the feet remained attached to one another as we found them in Ossuary No. 4. Under the head of the nail, the osteological investigators found the remains of this wooden plaque, made of either acacia or pistacia wood. The wood attached to the curled end of the nail that had penetrated the upright of the cross was, by contrast, olive wood.At first the investigators thought that the bony material penetrated by the nail was only the right heel bone (calcaneum). This assumption initially led them to a mistaken conclusion regarding the victims position on the cross. Further investigation disclosed, however, that the nail had penetrated both heel bones. The left ankle bone (sustentaculum tali) was found still attached to the bone mass adjacent to the right ankle bone, which was itself attached to the right heel bone. When first discovered, the two heel bones appeared to be two formless, unequal bony bulges surrounding an iron nail, coated by a thick calcareous crust. But painstaking investigation gradually disclosed the makeup of the bony mass.bA word about the conditions under which the bones in the ossuaries were studied might be appropriate here. The medical team that studied the bones was given only four weeks to conduct their examination before the bones were reburied in a modern ceremony. Certain long-term preservation procedures were therefore impossible, and this precluded certain kinds of measurements and comparative studies. In the case of the crucified man, however, the investigators were given an additional period of time to study the materials, and it was during this period that the detailed conditions described here were discovered.When removed from the tomb chamber, each of the eight ossuaries was one-third filled with a syrupy fluid. Strangely enough, the considerable moisture in the ossuaries resulted in a peculiar kind of preservation of the packed bones. The bones immersed in the fluid at the bottom of the ossuaries were coated with a limy sediment. As a result, the nailed heel bones were preserved in relatively good condition. Nevertheless, the overall condition of the bones must be described as fragile.Before they were studied, the bones were first dehydrated and then impregnated with a preservative. Only then could they be measured and photographed.Despite these limiting conditions, a detailed and very human picture of the crucified man gradually emerged. At 5 feet 6 inches (167 cm) tall, this young man in his mid- to late-twenties stood at about the mean height for Mediterranean people of the time. His limb bones were fine, slender, graceful and harmonious. The muscles that had been attached to his limb bones were lean, pointing to moderate muscular activity, both in childhood and after maturity. Apparently he never engaged in heavy physical labor. We can tell that he had never been seriously injured before his crucifixion, because investigators found no pathological deformations or any traumatic bony lesions. His bones indicated no marks of any disease or nutritional deficiency.The young mans face, however, was unusual. He had a cleft right palatea congenital anomaly which was also associated with the congenital absence of the right upper canine tooth and the deformed position of several other teeth. In addition, his facial skeleton was asymmetric, slanting slightly from one side to the other (plagiocephaly). The eye sockets were at slightly different heights, as were the nasal apertures. There were differences between the left and right branches of the lower jaw bone, and the forehead was more flattened on the right side than on the left. Some of these asymmetries have a direct association with the cleft palate.From drawings of Yehohanans skull, an artist has sketched a portrait of the young man who was crucified in the early first century A.D. Yehohanans face was slightly asymmetrical. This deformity was probably the result of two factors: Yehohanans mother may have been deprived of food or suffered some severe stress during the first weeks of her pregnancy, and the birth may have been a difficult one. Yehohanan had a cleft palate, his eyes, nostrils and jaws were at slightly different heights, and his forehead was flatter on the right side than on the left. But hair, beard and moustache probably disguised these irregularities. In fact, Yehohanan was a pleasant looking man whose graceful, muscular and perfectly proportioned body must have compensated for a less-than-perfect face. Courtesy Israel Exploration Journal Vol. 20, Numbers 12, (1970)The majority of modern medical scholars ascribe a cleft palate (and some associated asymmetries of the face) not to a genetic factor but to a critical change in the manner of life of the pregnant woman in the first two or three weeks of pregnancy. This critical change has frequently been identified as an unexpected deterioration in the womans diet, in association with psychical stress. Statistically, this malformation occurs more frequently in chronically undernourished and underprivileged families than in the well-situated. But some catastrophe could cause sudden stress in the life of a well-to-do woman as well.Other asymmetries of the facial skeleton may be attributable to disturbances in the final period of pregnancy or difficulties in delivery. Thus, our medical experts conjectured two prenatal crises in the life of this crucified man: one in the first few weeks of his mothers pregnancy and the other, a most difficult birth.To help determine the appearance of the face, the team of anatomical experts took 38 anthropological measurements, 28 other measurements, and determined four cranial indices. The general shape of the facial skeleton, including the forehead, was five-sided. Excluding the forehead, the face was triangular, tapering below eye level. The nasal bones were large, curved, tight in the upper region and coarse in the lower part. The mans nose was curved and his chin robust, altogether a mild-featured facial skeleton.Despite the prenatal anomalies, the mans face must have been quite pleasant, although some might say that it must have been a bit wild. His defects were doubtless almost imperceptible, hidden by his hair, beard and moustache. His body was proportionate, agreeable and graceful, particularly in motion.What his life was like, we cannot know. But he seems to have come from a comfortable, if not well-to-do family. One of the ossuaries (not the one containing the crucified man) was inscribed in Aramaic on the side: Simon, builder of the Temple. Apparently at least one member of the family participated in Herods lavish rebuilding of the Temple on Jerusalems Temple Mount. Simon may well have been a master mason or an engineer. Another ossuary was inscribed Yehonathan the potter.Simon, builder of the Temple. The inscription on this ossuary found in the same Jewish tomb with the ossuary of Yehohanan tells posterity the part Simon played in history. Eight ossuaries containing the bones of 17 members of Simon and Yehohanans family were found in this tomb. Since not all families could afford limestone ossuaries for secondary burials, we know that this was a family of some wealth.We may conjecture that during this turbulent period of history, our crucified man was sentenced to die by crucifixion for some political crime. His remains reveal the horrible manner of his dying.From the way in which the bones were attached, we can infer the mans position on the cross. The two heel bones were attached on their adjacent inside (medial) surfaces. The nail went through the right heel bone and then the left. Since the same nail went through both heels, the legs were together, not apart, on the cross.A study of the two heel bones and the nail that penetrated them at an oblique angle pointing downward and sideways indicates that the feet of the victim were not fastened tightly to the cross. A small seat, or sedile must have been fastened to the upright of the cross. The evidence as to the position of the body on the cross convinced the investigators that the sedile supported only the mans left buttock. This seat both prevented the collapse of the body and prolonged the agony.Given this position on the cross and given the way in which the heel bones were attached to the cross, it seems likely that the knees were bent, or semi-flexed, as in the drawing. This position of the legs was dramatically confirmed by a study of the long bones below the knees, the tibia or shinbone and the fibula behind it.Only the tibia of the crucified mans right leg was available for study. The bone had been brutally fractured into large, sharp slivers. This fracture was clearly produced by a single, strong blow. The left calf bones were lying across the sharp edge of the wooden cross, and the percussion from the blow on the right calf bones passed into the left calf bones, producing a harsh and severing blow to them as well. The left calf bones broke in a straight, sharp-toothed line on the edge of the cross, a line characteristic of a fresh bone fracture. This fracture resulted from the pressure on both sides of the boneon one side from the direct blow on the right leg and on the other from the resistance of the edge of the cross.Crucifixion of Yehohanan. Study of the wounds on Yehohanans skeleton enabled osteologists to reconstruct his position on the cross. His arms were nailed above the wrists to the crossbeam. His legs were bent and twisted to one side, and a small sedile, or seat, supported only his left buttock. Courtesy Israel Exploration Journal Vol. 20, Numbers 12, (1970)The angle of the line of fracture on these left calf bones provides proof that the victims legs were in a semi-flexed position on the cross. The angle of the fracture indicates that the bones formed an angle of 60 to 65 as they crossed the upright of the cross. This compels the interpretation that the legs were semi-flexed.When we add this evidence to that of the nail and the way in which the heel bones were attached to the cross, we must conclude that this position into which the victims body was forced was both difficult and unnatural.The arm bones of the victim revealed the manner in which they were attached to the horizontal bar of the cross. A small scratch was observed on one bone (the radius) of the right forearm, just above the wrist. The scratch was produced by the compression, friction and gliding of an object on the fresh bone. This scratch is the osteological evidence of the penetration of the nail between the two bones of the forearm, the radius and the ulna.Christian iconography usually shows the nails piercing the palms of Jesus hands. Nailing the palms of the hands is impossible, because the weight of the slumping body would have torn the palms in a very short time. The victim would have fallen from the cross while still alive. As the evidence from our crucified man demonstrates, the nails were driven into the victims arms, just above the wrists, because this part of the arm is sufficiently strong to hold the weight of a slack body.cThe position of the crucified body may then be described as follows: The feet were joined almost parallel, both transfixed by the same nail at the heels, with the legs adjacent; the knees were doubled, the right one overlapping the left; the trunk was contorted and seated on a sedile; the upper limbs were stretched out, each stabbed by a nail in the forearm.The victims broken legs not only provided crucial evidence for the position on the cross, but they also provide evidence for a Palestinian variation of Roman crucifixionat least as applied to Jews. Normally, the Romans left the crucified person undisturbed to die slowly of sheer physical exhaustion leading to asphyxia. However, Jewish tradition required burial on the day of execution. Therefore, in Palestine the executioner would break the legs of the crucified person in order to hasten his death and thus permit burial before nightfall. This practice, described in the Gospels in reference to the two thieves who were crucified with Jesus (John 19:18), has now been archaeologically confirmed.d Since the victim we excavated was a Jew, we may conclude that the executioners broke his legs on purpose in order to accelerate his death and allow his family to bury him before nightfall in accordance with Jewish custom.We cannot know the crime of which our victim was accused. Given the prominence and wealth of the family, it is unlikely that he was a common thief. More likely, he was crucified for political crimes or seditious activities directed against the Roman authorities. Apparently, this Jewish family had two or three sons active in the political, religious and social life of Jerusalem at the end of the Second Temple period. One (Simon) was active in the reconstruction of the Temple. Another (Yehonathan) was a potter. The third son may have been active in anti-Roman political activities, for which he was crucified.Theres something else we know about this victim. We know his name. Scratched on the side of the ossuary containing his bones were the words Yehohanan, the son of Hagakol.Ossuary of Yehohanan. About a year after Yehohanan had been crucified, his family reburied his bones in this stone box and scratched his name not once, but several times, into the stone. One of the two inscriptions on this long side of the ossuary reads Yhwhnn bn hgqwl, Yehohanan, son of HGQWL. A clear translation of Yehohanans fathers name is not possible, but it may be a corruption of the name Ezekiel. Courtesy Israel Exploration Journal Vol. 20, Numbers 12, (1970) For further details, see Vassilios Tzaferis, Jewish Tombs at and near Givat ha-Mivtar, Jerusalem, Israel Exploration Journal 20/1, 2 (1970), pp. 1832; Nico Haas, Anthropological Observations on the Skeletal Remains from Givat ha-Mivtar, Israel Exploration Journal 20/1, 2 (1970), pp. 3859; and Joseph Naveh, The Ossuary Inscriptions from Givat ha-Mivtar, Israel Exploration Journal 20/1, 2 (1970), pp. 3337. See also, for a different hypothesis as to the position of Yehohanan on the cross, Yigael Yadin, Epigraphy and Crucifixion, Israel Exploration Journal 23 (1973), pp. 1822. On the history of crucifixion, see Pierre Barbet, A Doctor at Calvary (Image Books, 1963).Also, be sure to read the Scholars Corner: New Analysis of the Crucified Man by Hershel Shanks, discussing the scholarly responses to Vassilios Tzaferis article. Notes1. Diodorus Siculus XIV:53.2. Josephus, Antiquities XIV:380381.3. Appian, B. Civ. I, 120.a. A spindle bottle resembles a cylinder that bulges at its midsection.b. A medical team from the Department of Anatomy at the Hebrew University Hadassah Medical School, headed by Dr. Nico Haas, made an intensive, if brief, study of the bones.c. Early Christian artists, although frequently representing events from the life of Jesus, refrained from drawing scenes of the crucifixion during the first 500 years of Christian history. The earliest Christian representation of the crucifixion dates to the late fifth or early sixth centuries A.D., i.e., about 200 years after crucifixion was legally abolished by the emperor Constantine the Great.d. In John 19:34, a lance is plunged into Jesus heart. This was not intended as the death blow but as a post mortem blow inflicted in order to testify to the victims death. Only after this testimonial was obtained was the body removed from the cross and handed over to the victims relatives for burial. The blow to the heart proved beyond doubt that the victim was indeed dead. Born on the Isle of Samos, in Greece, Vassilios Tzaferis received a Ph.D. from Hebrew University in Jerusalem. He has directed many excavations, including those at Ashkelon, Tiberius, Beth Shean, Capernaum and at various locations in Jerusalem. CrucifixionThe Archaeological Evidence by Vassilios Tzaferis originally appeared in Biblical Archaeology Review, Jan/Feb 1985, 44-53. Related reading in Bible History Daily:Roman Crucifixion Methods Reveal the History of CrucifixionJesus and the CrossWhere Is Golgotha, Where Jesus Was Crucified?Rare Evidence for Roman Crucifixion Found in Second-Century BritainAll-Access members, read more in the BAS Library:CrucifixionThe Archaeological EvidenceConversion, Crucifixion and Celebration: St. Philips Martyrium at Hierapolis draws thousands over the centuriesTwo Questions About Crucifixion: Does the victim die of asphyxiation? Would nails in the hand hold the weight of the body?Jesus Triumphal March to Crucifixion: The sacred way as Roman processionNot a BAS Library or All-Access Member yet? Join today. Crucifixion in Antiquity BAS Staff August 17, 2024 68 Comments 365933 views What do we know about the history of crucifixion? In the following article, New Analysis of the Crucified Man, Hershel Shanks looks at evidence of Roman crucifixion methods as analyzed from the remains found in Jerusalem of a young man crucified in the first century A.D. The remains included a heel bone pierced by a large nail, giving archaeologists, osteologists and anthropologists evidence of crucifixion in antiquity.Crucifixion in antiquity was a gruesome execution, not really understood until a skeletal discovery in the 1980s that gave new insight into the history of crucifixion. Photo: Courtesy Israel Exploration Journal, Vol. 35, No. 1 (1985)What do these bones tell us about the history of crucifixion? The excavator of the crucified man, Vassilios Tzaferis, followed the analysis of Nico Haas of Hebrew University-Hadassah Medical School in Jerusalem suggesting Roman crucifixion methods: a contorted position: arms nailed to the crossbeam; legs bent, twisted to one side, and held in place by a single nail that passed through a wooden plaque, through both left and right heel bones, and then into the upright of the cross.However, when Joseph Zias and Eliezer Sekeles reexamined the remains, looking for evidence of Roman crucifixion methods, they found no evidence that nails had penetrated the victims arms; moreover, the nail in the foot was not long enough to have penetrated the plaque, both feet, and the cross. And, indeed, what were previously thought to be fragments of two heel bones through which the nail passed were shown to be fragments of only one heel bone and a long bone. On the basis of this evidence, Zias and Sekeles suggest that the mans legs straddled the cross and that his arms were tied to the crossbeam with ropes, signifying the method of crucifixion in antiquity.Literary sources giving insight into the history of crucifixion indicate that Roman crucifixion methods had the condemned person carry to the execution site only the crossbar. Wood was scarce and the vertical pole was kept stationary and used repeatedly. Below, in New Analysis of the Crucified Man, Hershel Shanks concludes that crucifixion in antiquity involved death by asphyxiation, not death by nail piercing. Scholars Corner: New Analysis of the Crucified ManBy Hershel ShanksDrawing of the contorted crucifixion position proposed by Vassilios Tzaferis, based on the analysis of Nico Haas, which has since been challenged by Joseph Zias and Eliezer Sekeles. For full caption, see drawing from Israel Exploration Journal 35:1. Photo: Courtesy Israel Exploration Journal, Vol. 20, No. 12 (1970)In our January/February 1985 issue, we published an article about the only remains of a crucified man to be recovered from antiquity (CrucifixionThe Archaeological Evidence, BAR, January/February 1985). Vassilios Tzaferis, the author of the article and the excavator of the crucified man, based much of his analysis of the victims position on the cross and other aspects of the method of crucifixion on the work of a medical team from Hebrew University-Hadassah Medical School headed by Nico Haas, who had analyzed the crucified mans bones. In a recent article in the Israel Exploration Journal, however, Joseph Zias, an anthropologist with the Israel Department of Antiquities, and Eliezer Sekeles of Hebrew University-Hadassah Medical School in Jerusalem question many of Haass conclusions concerning the bones of the crucified man.a The questions Zias and Sekeles raise affect many of the conclusions about the mans position during crucifixion.According to Haas, the nail in the crucified man penetrated both his right and left heel bones, piercing the right heel bone (calcaneum) first, then the left. Haas found a fragment of bone attached to the right heel that he thought was part of the left heel bone (sustentaculum tali). If Haass analysis is correct, the two heel bones must have been penetrated by the same nail, and the victims legs must have been in a closed position on the cross.But according to the new analysis of the bones just published in the Israel Exploration Journal, the bone fragment Haas identified as part of the left heel bone was incorrectly identified. The shape and structure of this bony fragment is of a long bone; it cannot therefore be the left [heel bone], say the most recent investigators. Their conclusions are confirmed by x-rays, which reveal the varying density, structure and direction of the bones.Become a BAS All-Access MemberNow!Read Biblical Archaeology Review online, explore 50 years of BAR, watch videos, attend talks, and moreHaas also incorrectly assumed that the nail is seven inches (1718 cm) long. In fact, the total length of the nail from head to tip is only 4.5 inches (11.5 cm). A wooden plaque less than an inch thick (2 cm) had been punctured by the nail before it passed through the right heel bone. After exiting from the bone, the nail penetrated the cross itself and then bent, probably because it hit a knot. As the new investigators observe, given the length of the nail, There simply was not enough room for both heel bones and a two centimeter wooden plaque to have been pierced by the nail and affixed to the vertical shaft of the cross. The nail was sufficient for affixing only one heel bone to the cross.In short, only the right heel bone was penetratedlaterally, or sidewiseby the nail. Accordingly, the victims position on the cross must have been different from that portrayed by Haas.The new investigators also dispute Haass conclusion that a scratch on the bone of the right forearm (radius) of the victim, just above the wrist, represents the penetration of a nail between the two bones of the forearm. According to Zias and Sekeles, such scratches and indentations are commonly found on ancient skeletal material, including on the right leg bone (fibula) of this man. Such scratches and indentations have nothing to do with crucifixion.How then was the crucified man attached to the cross?As the new investigators observe:The literary sources for the Roman period contain numerous descriptions of crucifixion but few exact details as to how the condemned were affixed to the cross. Unfortunately, the direct physical evidence here is also limited to one right calcaneum (heel bone) pierced by an 11.5 cm iron nail with traces of wood at both ends.According to the literary sources, those condemned to crucifixion never carried the complete cross, despite the common belief to the contrary and despite the many modern reenactments of Jesus walk to Golgotha. Instead, only the crossbar was carried, while the upright was set in a permanent place where it was used for subsequent executions. As the first-century Jewish historian Josephus noted, wood was so scarce in Jerusalem during the first century A.D. that the Romans were forced to travel ten miles from Jerusalem to secure timber for their siege machinery.According to Zias and Sekeles:One can reasonably assume that the scarcity of wood may have been expressed in the economics of crucifixion in that the crossbar as well as the upright would be used repeatedly. Thus, the lack of traumatic injury to the forearm and metacarpals of the hand seems to suggest that the arms of the condemned were tied rather than nailed to the cross. There is ample literary and artistic evidence for the use of ropes rather than nails to secure the condemned to the cross.According to Zias and Sekeles, the victims legs straddled the vertical shaft of the cross, one leg on either side, with the nails penetrating the heel bones. The plaque or plate under the head of the nail, they say, was intended to secure the nail and prevent the condemned man from pulling his feet free.As Haas correctly suggested, the nail probably hit a knot which bent the nail. However, as Zias and Sekeles reconstruct the removal of the dead man from the cross:Once the body was removed from the cross, albeit with some difficulty in removing the right leg, the condemned mans family would now find it impossible to remove the bent nail without completely destroying the heel bone. This reluctance to inflict further damage to the heel led [to his burial with the nail still in his bone, and this in turn led] to the eventual discovery of the crucifixion.Whether the victims arms were tied, rather than nailed to the cross is irrelevant to the manner of his dying. As Zias and Sekeles point out:Death by crucifixion was the result of the manner in which the condemned man hung from the cross and not the traumatic injury caused by nailing. Hanging from the cross resulted in a painful process of asphyxiation, in which the two sets of muscles used for breathing, the intercostal [chest] muscles and the diaphragm, became progressively weakened. In time, the condemned man expired, due to the inability to continue breathing properly. Notesa. The Crucified Man from Givat ha-Mivtar: A Reappraisal, Israel Exploration Journal Vol. 35, No. 1 (1985), pp. 2227.Zias and Sekeles also note a number of other errors in Haass report:The victims legs were not broken as a final coup de grce. The break so identified by Haas was postmortem.The victim did not have a cleft palate. The upper right canine was not missing, despite Haass report to the contrary.The wood from which the plaque under the nail head was made was olive wood, not acacia or pistacia, as Hans suggested.The wood fragments attached to the end of the nail were too minute to be analyzed. Haas suggested the vertical shaft of the cross was olive wood. This is possible, but unlikely. Related reading in Bible History DailyAncient Crucifixion ImagesIs Jesus Crucifixion Reflected in Soil Deposition?Rare Evidence for Roman Crucifixion Found in Second-Century BritainThe StaurogramAll-Access members, read more in the BAS LibraryCrucifixionThe Archaeological Evidence by Vassilios TzaferisExplaining Jesus Crucifixion by Helmut KoesterImages of Crucifixion: Fresh Evidence by Ben Witherington IIITwo Questions About Crucifixion By Frederick T. ZugibeNot a BAS Library or All-Access Member yet? Join today. New Analysis of the Crucified Man by Hershel Shanks first appeared in Biblical Archaeology Review, November/December 1985. It was first reprinted in BHD, September 2012. Romans likely used ropes rather than nails Marek Dospil April 16, 2025 0 Comments 9990 views How was Jesus crucified? Crucifix showing Jesus with his palms and feet nailed to the cross (Spain, 12th century). Photo: The Met Cloisters, public domain.How was Jesus crucified? This question sounds so trivial it is almost confusing. Christian tradition has always portrayed Jesus hanging from the cross with his palms and feet painfully pierced with nails. Nail wounds feature prominently in the graphic representations of the crucified Jesus. We may then be surprised to learn that the otherwise detailed gospel accounts of Jesuss execution never actually specify how Jesus was secured to the cross. Although Roman execution methods did include crucifixion with nails, contemporary sources paint a more complex picture.Writing for the Spring 2025 issue of Biblical Archaeology Review, Jeffrey P. Arroyo Garca revisits all the evidence we have for the crucifixion of Jesus. In his article titled Nails or KnotsHow Was Jesus Crucified? Garca focuses on how exactly Jesus was secured to the crosswhether nails were used or not. FREE ebook, Who Was Jesus? Exploring the History of Jesus Life. Examine fundamental questions about Jesus of Nazareth. Professor of biblical studies at Gordon College who specializes in the Gospels and Greco-Roman Jewish literature, Garca first examines contemporary written sourcesboth Jewish and Greco-Roman. Our historical and textual sources from the late Second Temple period are quite vague on how crucifixion was carried out, summarizes Garca in his review of historical writings. Apparently, the Gospels use ambiguous Greek words meaning to hang up or to hang on a stake when describing the crucifixion of Jesus, and the Dead Sea Scrolls use the similarly ambiguous Hebrew word talah to hang when reporting on crucifixions of criminals.Heel bone from Givat HaMivtar with a nail driven through it (replica). Photo courtesy of the Photo Companion to the Bible.Intriguingly, archaeologists found a pierced heel bone (see photo above) at the Jewish burial site of Givat HaMivtar in Jerusalem in 1968. It was mixed with other human remains at the bottom of an ossuary dating from the period between the first century BCE and the First Jewish Revolt (6674 CE). The ossuary (ancient bone box) was one of eight discovered in the Givat HaMivtar tombs. Although otherwise undecorated, this box featured an incised inscription Yehohanan ben hagaqol, where the first word is clearly a personal name. The term hagaqol, however, may describe the method of crucifixion with knees apart, as proposed by pioneering Israeli archaeologist Yigael Yadin.While there are no pictorial representations of crucifixion dating from the time of Jesus, Garca suggests that the crucifixion method from the Yehohanans ossuary inscription has parallels in later ancient depictions. The famous Alexamenos graffito (see drawing below), for instance, shows a deity with the head of a donkey, fixed to what looks like a cross. Dating from early-third-century Rome, the accompanying inscription identifies the bystander as one Alexamenos, who allegedly is worshiping the crucified figure as his god. Notably, the donkey-headed deity has knees apart.Alexamenos graffito showing a person worshiping his deity suspended on a cross (Rome, third century CE). Photo: Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.But let us return to the initial question: How was Jesus crucified? Although some have suggested the gruesome find from Givat HaMivtar may date from the time of Jesus, it cannot be taken as a proof that Jesus was crucified using nails or that such a method was common in Judea. In fact, it is not until the Great Jewish Revolt, which culminated in the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE, that we have written reports about this specific Roman execution method. In his Jewish War, which he wrote in the late 70s, the Jewish historian Flavius Josephus describes the nailing of some of Judahs elites to the cross (War 2.308) and then specifies that Roman soldiers similarly executed some of Jerusalems defenders (War 2.451). It would then seem that in Judea the Roman method of crucifixion with nails does not predate the First Jewish Revolt, while there is evidence that it continued well into the second century.Become a BAS All-Access MemberNow!Read Biblical Archaeology Review online, explore 50 years of BAR, watch videos, attend talks, and moreCrucifixion was a common form of punishment in the Roman world. Yet when ancient texts and archaeological evidence are examined together, it appears that nailing a victim to a cross may not have been as common as most people think. And it might have been introduced in Judea only after the time of Jesus, concludes Garca.To further explore the evidence for Jesuss crucifixion, read Jeffrey P. Arroyo Garcas article Nails or KnotsHow Was Jesus Crucified? published in the Spring 2025 issue of Biblical Archaeology Review. Subscribers: Read the full article Nails or KnotsHow Was Jesus Crucified? by Jeffrey P. Arroyo Garca in the Spring 2025 issue of Biblical Archaeology Review.Not a BAS Library or All-Access Member yet? Join today. Related reading in Bible History DailyAncient Crucifixion ImagesA Tomb in Jerusalem Reveals the History of Crucifixion and Roman Crucifixion MethodsRoman Crucifixion Methods Reveal the History of CrucifixionThe StaurogramAll-Access members, read more in the BAS LibraryBiblical Views: Images of Crucifixion: Fresh Evidence Two Questions About Crucifixion CrucifixionThe Archaeological Evidence Not a BAS Library or All-Access Member yet? Join today. When did Christians start to depict images of Jesus on the cross? Biblical Archaeology Society Staff September 24, 2024 43 Comments 62124 views The staurogram combines the Greek letters tau-rho to stand in for parts of the Greek words for cross (stauros) and crucify (stauro) in Bodmer papyrus P75. Staurograms serve as the earliest images of Jesus on the cross, predating other Christian crucifixion imagery by 200 years. Photo: Foundation Martin Bodmer.How and when did Christians start to depict images of Jesus on the cross? Some believe the early church avoided images of Jesus on the cross until the fourth or fifth century. In The Staurogram: Earliest Depiction of Jesus Crucifixion in the March/April 2013 issue of Biblical Archaeology Review, Larry Hurtado highlights an early Christian crucifixion symbol that sets the date back by 150200 years.Larry Hurtado describes how a symbol known as a staurogram is created out of the Greek letters tau-rho: In Greek, the language of the early church, the capital tau, or T, looks pretty much like our T. The capital rho, or R, however, is written like our P. If you superimpose the two letters, it looks something like this: . The earliest Christian uses of this tau-rho combination make up what is known as a staurogram. In Greek the verb to crucify is stauro; a cross is a stauros [these letters produce] a pictographic representation of a crucified figure hanging on a crossused in the Greek words for crucify and cross.The tau-rho staurogram is one of several christograms, or monogram-like devices, used by ancient Christians to refer to Jesus. However, Larry Hurtado points out that the staurogram only refers to the crucifixion, unlike others, which mention Jesus other characteristics. Also, the staurogram is visualthe tau-rho combinations create images of Jesus on the cross, making the staurogram the earliest Christian images of Jesus on the cross. Easter: Exploring the Resurrection of JesusIn this free eBook, expert Bible scholars offer in-depth reflections on the resurrection. The tau-rho staurogram, like other christograms, was originally a pre-Christian symbol. A Herodian coin featuring the Staurogram predates the crucifixion. Soon after, Christian adoption of staurogram symbols served as the first visual images of Jesus on the cross.Larry Hurtado writes: In time christograms came to be used not only in texts but as free-standing symbols of Christ or Christian faith, for example on liturgical vestments and church utensils. This was probably also true of the staurogram, tau-rho; where it would represent simply an independent symbol of Christ or Christian faith. But the earliest use of the tau-rho was as a visual reference to Jesus crucifixion. As such, it is the earliest surviving depiction of Jesus crucifixion. Subscribers: For more about the earliest Christian images of Jesus on the cross, read the full article The Staurogram: Earliest Depiction of Jesus Crucifixion by Larry Hurtado as it appears in the March/April 2013 issue of Biblical Archaeology Review. Related reading in Bible History Daily:The Archaeological Quest for the Earliest ChristiansThe Archaeological Quest for the Earliest ChristiansRoman Crucifixion Methods Reveal the History of CrucifixionBorrowing from the NeighborsThe Origin of ChristianityThe Enduring Symbolism of DovesAll-Access members, read more in the BAS LibraryThe Staurogram: Earliest Depiction of Jesus CrucifixionHas the House Where Jesus Stayed in Capernaum Been Found?CrucifixionThe Archaeological Evidence Jesus Triumphal March to Crucifixion: The sacred way as Roman processionNot a BAS Library or All-Access Member yet? Join today. This Bible History Daily feature was originally published in March 2013.

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