

CRUCIFIXION IN THE JEWISH LITERATURE

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Some scholars argue that crucifixion is not a form of death sentence in Jewish law, but a Roman death sentence. According to them, it was not the Jews but the Roman governor who killed Jesus. However, the study of Jewish literature reveals that in pre-Christian era, hanging of criminals on trees was practiced under the Jewish law as a death sentence. A criminal was hung either alive or dead and deemed accursed by God on the authority of the following passages.

HANGING / CRUCIFIXION IN OLD TESTAMENT

“Then the LORD said to Moses, ‘Take all the leaders of the people and hang the offenders before the LORD, out in the sun, that the fierce anger of the LORD may turn away from Israel.’” (Numbers 25:4 New King James Version)

“If a man has committed a sin deserving of death, and he is put to death, and you hang him on a tree,²³ his body shall not remain overnight on the tree, but you shall surely bury him that day, so that you do not defile the land which the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance; for he who is hanged is accursed of God.” (Deuteronomy 21:22-23 New King James Version)

“And the Gibeonites said to him, “We will have no silver or gold from Saul or from his house, nor shall you kill any man in Israel for us.” So he said, “Whatever you say, I will do for you.” Then they answered the king, “As for the man who consumed us and plotted against us, that we should be destroyed from remaining in any of the territories of Israel,⁶ let seven men of his descendants be delivered to us, and we will hang them before the LORD in Gibeah of Saul, whom the LORD chose.” And the king said, “I will give them.” (2 Samuel 21:4-6 New King James Version)

“And the king of Ai he hanged on a tree until evening. And as soon as the sun was down, Joshua commanded that they should take his corpse down from the tree, cast it at the entrance of the gate of the city, and raise over it a great heap of stones that remains to this day.” (Joshua 8:29 New King James Version)

CRUCIFIXION IS A CURSE OF GOD

A fundamental element of this debated issue is that St. Paul, on the basis of the first passage, Deut. 21:23, claimed that Jesus was cursed by dying on cross. So far, no Jewish authority has

ever refuted that the one who dies on a cross is not cursed and that Jesus did not die on the cross and thus not accursed of God. As a matter of fact they deny his claim of a Jewish Messiah being died a cursed death on cross. However, they deny that he was executed by Jews under the Jewish law.

Christ Became Cursed

“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.’)” (Galatians 3:13 New King James Version)

Crucified Messiah—A Stumbling Block for Jews—Foolishness for Greeks

“For Jews request a sign, and Greeks seek after wisdom; ²³ but we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.” (1 Corinthians 1:22-24 New King James Version)

Murdered by Hanging on a Tree

“The God of our fathers raised up Jesus whom you murdered by hanging on a tree.” (Acts 5:30 New King James Version)

“And we are witnesses of all things which He did both in the land of the Jews and in Jerusalem, whom they killed by hanging on a tree.” (Acts 10:39 New King James Version)

Trypho says that Jesus died a Cursed Death

“But, the one whom you call Christ was without glory and honor to such an extent that he incurred the last curse of God’s law, namely, he was crucified.” (Dialogue with Trypho, By St. Justin Martyr, P-49, Translated by Thomas B. Falls, Revised and with a new Introduction by Thomas P. Halton, Edited by Michael Slusser, The Catholic University of America Press, 1984)

A Crucified Man cannot be the Jewish Messiah

“This last utterance was in all its implications itself a disproof of the exaggerated claims made for him after his death by his disciples. The very form of his punishment would disprove those claims in Jewish eyes. No Messiah that Jews could recognize could suffer such a death; for “He that is hanged is accursed of God” (Deut.xxi, 23), “an insult to God” (Targum, Rashi). How far in his own mind Jesus substituted another conception of the Messiah, and how far he regarded himself as fulfilling that ideal, still remain among the most obscure of the historical problems.” (Jewish Encyclopedia under Article ‘Jesus’ sub-heading ‘Crucifixion’ - Vol-7, P-166)

“Jews Take Responsibility”

In the book, *“Jewish History, Jewish Religion The Weight of Three Thousand Years”*, Jewish Professor *Israel Shahak* says that Talmud and other classical Jewish sources, including the ‘notorious’ book *“Toledot Yeshu”* happily take the responsibility of Jesus’ execution.

“According to Talmud, Jesus was executed by a proper rabbinical court for idolatry, inciting other Jews to idolatry, and contempt of rabbinical authority. All classical Jewish sources which mention his execution are quite happy to take responsibility for it; in the Talmudic account the Romans are not even mentioned. The more popular accounts – which were nevertheless taken quite seriously – such as notorious Taldot Yeshu are even worse, for in addition to the above crimes they accuse him of witchcraft. The very name ‘Jesus’ was for Jews a symbol of all that is abominable, and this popular tradition still persists.” (P-98)

“THE BABYLONIAN TALMUD”

A part of the Talmud, *the tractate Sanhedrin*, tells us that there were four kinds of death sentences; stoning, burning, beheading, and hanging. Even though the word ‘tree’ is used to depict hanging, the description shows one beam was either sunk in the ground or inclined against a wall and the second was tied to its top, exactly in the shape of a cross. The criminal, or the corpse, was hung on top.

“MISHNA VI.: How was one hanged? The beam was put in the earth, and it was fastened at the top, and he tied the hands of the culprit one upon the other, and hung him up. R. Jose said: The beam was not put in the earth, but the top of it was supported by the wall, and he hung him up as the butchers do, and he took him off immediately. And should he leave him over night, he transgressed a negative commandment, as it reads [Deut.xxi. 23]: “Thou shalt not leave his corpse on the tree over night, but thou shalt surely bury him on that day (for he that is hanged) is a dishonor of God,” etc. How so? “Why is this man hanged?” “He is a blasphemer.” Hence the name of Heaven is violated.” (New Edition of the Babylonian Talmud – Original Text, Edited, Corrected, Formulated and Translated into English by Michael L. Rodkinson – Section Jurisprudence (Damages) – Tract Sanhedrin (Supreme Council) P-141 – Volumes VII and VIII (XV and XVI) – New York – New Talmud Publishing Company 1117 Simpson Street -1902)

“THE TALMUD”

Joseph Barclay describes crucifixion, in his book, as the Jewish custom of punishment and a curse from God for blasphemers and idolaters. He also asserts, quoting from the Talmud that

Jesus was charged of blasphemy, idolatry, and sorcery, and sentenced to death by crucifixion, by a rabbinical court:

*"In the later editions of the Talmud the allusions to Christ and Christianity are few and cautious, compared with the earlier or unexpurgated copies. The last of these was published at Amsterdam in 1645. In them our Lord and Saviour is "that one," "such as one," "a fool," "the leper," "the deceiver of Israel," etc. Efforts are made to prove that He is the son of Joseph Pandira before his marriage with Mary. His miracles are attributed to sorcery, the secret of which He brought in a slit in His flesh out of Egypt. His teacher is said to have been Joshua, the son of Perachiah. This Joshua is said to have afterwards excommunicated him to the blast of 400 rams' horns, though he must have lived seventy years before His time. Forty days before the death of Jesus a witness was summoned by public proclamation to attest His innocence, but none appeared. **He is said to have been first stoned, and then hanged on the eve of the Passover.** His disciples are called heretics, and opprobrious names. They are accused of immoral practices; and the New Testament is called a sinful book. The references to these subjects manifest the most bitter aversion and hatred." (P-38,39)*

*"All who were stoned were hung up." The words of Rabbi Eliezer. But the Sages say, **"none were hung up, save the blasphemer and the idolater...How did they hang him? They sunk a beam in the ground, and a transverse beam proceeded from it,** and they bound his hands, one over the other, and hung him up (by them). R. Jose said, "the beam was inclined against the wall, and he was hung upon it, just as the butchers do." And they loosed him immediately afterwards. "But if he was out all night?" "It was a transgression of a negative command, as is said, 'His body shall not remain all night upon the tree, but thou shalt in any wise bury him that day (**for he that is hanged is accursed of God**),'"* etc. As one says, "wherefore is this one hung?" "Because he blasphemed the NAME, and it follows that the heavenly NAME is profaned." (P-189)

"TOLEDOT YESHU"

Some 280,000 Jewish manuscript fragments were found in the **Genizah** or storeroom of the **Ben Ezra Synagogue** in **Fustat**, presently Old Cairo, and in the **Basatin cemetery** east of Old Cairo, Egypt. Aramic manuscript of **"Toledot Yeshu"** was one of them which disgracefully discuss life story of Jesus alleging him of illegitimate birth, heretical activities, and shameful death. This graphic biography of Jesus was written by different Jewish scholars in early centuries of Christianity. The Promised Messiah^{as} has mentioned it in his book "Braheen-e-Ahmadiyya" Vol-05.

”فسوس کہ یہ شبہات دلوں میں اسی وجہ سے پیدا ہوتے ہیں کہ عموماً اکثر مسلمانوں کو نہ یہودیوں کے فرقوں اور ان کے عقیدہ سے پوری واقفیت ہے اور نہ عیسائیوں کے عقیدہ کی پوری اطلاع ہے۔ لہذا میں مناسب سمجھتا ہوں کہ اس جگہ میں یہودیوں کی ایک پرانی کتاب میں سے جو قریباً ۱۹۰۰ء سو برس کی تالیف ہے اور اس جگہ ہمارے پاس موجود ہے ان کے اس عقیدہ کی نسبت جو حضرت مسیح کے قتل کرنے کے بارے میں ایک فرقہ ان کا رکھتا ہے بیان کر دوں۔ اور یاد رہے کہ اس کتاب کا نام تولیدوت یشوع ہے جو ایک قدیم زمانہ کی ایک عبرانی کتاب مصنفہ بعض علماء یہود ہے۔ چنانچہ اس کتاب کے صفحہ ۳۱ میں لکھا ہے۔ ”پھر وہ (یعنی یہودی لوگ) یشوع کو باہر سزا کے میدان میں لے گئے اور اس کو سنگسار کر کے مار ڈالا اور جب وہ مر گیا تب اس کو کاٹھ پر لٹکا دیا تاکہ اس کی لاش کو جانور کھائیں اور اس طرح مردہ کی ذلت ہو۔ اس قول کی تائید انجیل کے اس قول سے بھی ہوتی ہے جہاں لکھا ہے کہ ”یشوع جسے تم نے قتل کر کے کاٹھ پر لٹکایا“۔ دیکھو اعمال باب ۵ آیت ۳۰۔“ (براہین احمدیہ حصہ پنجم روحانی خزائن جلد ۲۱ ص ۳۳۸)

“THE DEATH OF JESUS IN THE TOLEDOT YESHU LITERATURE “

In the following research article, by H. I. Newman published in the Journal of Theological Studies 1999 50(1), p.59, one aspect, i.e., death of Jesus, as described in ‘Toledot Yeshu’ is discussed.

“ This paper is devoted to one of these questions: the meaning of the peculiar depiction of the death and burial of Jesus in the pre-literary Toledot Yeshu tradition and in its earliest literary witnesses...Let us turn to the description of the execution of Jesus in the Aramaic fragments from the Geniza. The translation which follows is based on T.-S. Misc.35.87, the most complete of the published fragments. Occasional reference will be made to overlapping portions of the other manuscripts:T.-S. Misc. 35.88 and the two texts of ENA 2102 in the collection of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America. We pick up the narrative at the point at which Judah the Gardner has brought Jesus back to Tiberias from the cave of Elijah.

He brought him before Rabbi Joshua b. Perachiah, and they lifted him up and crucified him on a cabbage stalk. But before they lifted him up to the cross (צלִיבא), he [sc. Jesus] recalled what is written in the Torah: 'You shall not leave his corpse overnight on the cross' (Deut. 21:23). At that moment he sent and called for the people he had deceived and said to them: 'If you come tomorrow and find neither me nor my corpse on the cross, I shall have ascended to the firmament of Heaven, and you will not see me'. They crucified him alive and stoned him with a rock. He died on the cross, but they did not want to take him down from the cross. Rabbi Joshua said to them: 'On account of the wicked Jesus shall we change a statute of the Torah? For it is written: "You shall not leave his corpse overnight on the cross, etc." 'So they took him down from the cross and buried him in a water channel in the garden of Rabbi Judah the Gardener.”

Toledot Yeshu (The Life Story of Jesus) Revisited

The following review of this book is available at the following source:

<http://www.mohr.de/en/jewish-studies/subject-areas/all-books/buch/toledot-yeshu-the-life-story-of-jesus-revisited.html>. The review is useful in understanding the contents of the book.

“One of the most controversial books in history, Toledot Yeshu recounts the life story of Jesus from a negative and anti-Christian perspective. It ascribes to Jesus an illegitimate birth, a theft of the Ineffable Name of God, heretical activities, and, finally, a disgraceful death. Perhaps for centuries, the Toledot Yeshu circulated orally until it coalesced into various literary forms. Although the dates of these written compositions remain obscure, some early hints of a Jewish counter-history of Jesus can be found in the works of pagan and Christian authors of Late Antiquity, such as Celsus, Justin, and Tertullian. In the Middle Ages, the book became the object and tool of a most acrimonious controversy. Jews, Christians, and atheists – such as Ibn Shaprut, Luther, and Voltaire – quoted and commented on Toledot Yeshu, trying to disprove the beliefs of their opponents and revealing their own prejudices. Due to the offensive nature of the book, scholars have until recently paid little attention to Toledot Yeshu. In 2007, Peter Schäfer launched a project at Princeton University to prepare a scholarly edition with translation and commentary based on all the available manuscripts (about 150). Along with this project, Peter Schäfer, Michael Meerson, and Yaacov Deutsch organized an international conference, attended by the leading scholars of the subject, to discuss the present state of research. The conference contributions, published in this volume, mark a new stage in Toledot Yeshu research.” (Toledot Yeshu (“The Life Story of Jesus”) Revisited - A Princeton Conference Ed. by Peter Schäfer, Michael Meerson and Yaacov Deutsch)

“ANCIENT JEWISH AND CHRISTIAN PERCEPTIONS OF CRUCIFIXION” BY DAVID W. CHAPMAN

David W. Chapman in his book “Ancient Jewish and Christian Perceptions of Crucifixion” has not only described the perception of Jewish and Christian antiquity about crucifixion but also analyzed Hebrew and Aramaic terminologies of crucifixion and their use in Mishnaic, Midrashic and other rabbinic literature. His findings are quoted below under different sub-headings. Introducing his work, Chapman writes:

“This work indicates that the numerous references to crucifixion in ancient Jewish literature manifests a variety of perception of the cross. These perceptions are often overtly negative both toward the punishment and toward the person so executed. Yet more positive views can also be found...the emphasis throughout this book is on perceptions of crucifixion. In what ways did Jewish people in this period perceive of crucifixion and of a crucified person?...In short, what would immediately have sprung to

mind if someone learned of a person being crucified? And how did those understandings effect Christianity?”(P-2)

Crucifixion and Judaism in Contemporary Research

He has summarized the contemporary research in these words:

“Roughly speaking, among modern scholars addressing these issues there are three sets of opinions concerning the legality of crucifixion within ancient Jewish law;

(1) crucifixion was upheld as a viable means of execution by certain Jewish sects (i.e., Essenes, possibly Sadducees) and rejected by others (esp. Pharisees);

(2) crucifixion was universally rejected by all major Jewish sects – the Qumran and targumic passages either speaking to a different time, or to a different mode of punishment;

(3) crucifixion was accepted within ancient Jewish law at some early stages only later to be rejected by the formative rabbinic movement.” (P 5,6)

Dead Sea or Qumran Scrolls

Two Qumran documents; *pesher* of Nahum from Qumran Cave 4 and ‘11QTemple 64:6–13’ connect Deuteronomy 21:23 with crucifixion, which was apparently an Essene punishment for some very serious crimes. About these documents, David Chapman writes:

“In the last few decades, a significant portion of the work on crucifixion within Judaism has focused on two short passages from Qumran (4QpNah3-4 I 6-8; 11QTemple 64:6-13). The Nahum Pesher was released first. Its intriguing line about the Lion of Wrath who “hangs men alive” led to an initial appraisal of this phrase as a reference to crucifixion. Though some discussion ensued, an appeal to Sifre Deut 221, which contains a similar phrase appears to confirm this as a reference to crucifixion” (P-4)

Crucifixion—Practiced by Sadducees and Essenes—Not by Pharisees

“Drawing on this material, the one work that has presented the most methodical and comprehensive study of crucifixion in Jewish literature, an article by Luis Diez Merino, seeks to prove that there is pre-Mishnaic evidence that crucifixion ante-mortem was an acceptable penalty for some Jewish groups (Sadducees and Essenes), but not for others (Pharisees).” (P-5)

Four Methods of Death Penalty in Pre-Mishnaic Period

“In this light, the variant four-fold listing of death penalties in Tg. Ruth i.17 is perhaps less surprising: Naomi said, “We have four kinds of deaths for guilty: being stoned of stones, and burned of fire, and slain of the sword, and suspended of the tree.” The antiquity of this passage, which is deliberately given a closely literal translation, has been asserted by some on the principle that what is anti-Mishnaic must be pre-Mishnaic. Such a principle may need some refining since a period might be postulated in which the Mishnaic law grew into its pre-eminence (conflicting viewpoints being also possible at this time), but the point remains that the above text reflects a halakhic viewpoint at odds with that in the Mishnah.”(P.35,36)

The 800 Crucified by Alexander Jannaeus—A Sadducee High Priest and King

“One event, which Josephus considered significant enough to record in both his Antiquities and in the War, concerns the crucifixion of eight hundred Jews by Alexander Jannaeus (Bell. i.97-98; Ant. xiii.380). This represents the only instance in Josephus where a person of Jewish descent, who also still held to Jewish customs, crucified others. Alexander Jannaeus (=Yannai), a Hasmonean king, combined the offices of Jewish king and high priest. According to Josephus, while Alexander frequently fought fierce battles with the neighbours of Judea, he also spent much of his resources putting down homegrown Jewish rebellions...When Alexander seeks to appease his Jewish subjects, his offers are rejected. Instead a group of “Jews”...turns for assistance to Demetrius III (whom Josephus sarcastically deems “the Unready”). Demetrius’ forces initially bring the needed assistance; but after a brief victory, Demetrius retreats when he hears of six thousand Jews who turn to Jannaeus’ side. The Jewish rebels continue to fight, but they are now no match for their king. When Alexander finally gains the upper hand, he brings his captives back to Jerusalem to exact his gruesome retribution: ...and there he did a thing that was as cruel as could be: while he feasted with his concubines in a conspicuous place, he ordered some eight hundred of the Jews to be crucified, and slaughtered their children and wives before the eyes of the still living wretches. This was the revenge he took for the injuries he had suffered; but the penalty he exacted was inhuman for all that.” (P 53, 54)

Conclusion:

- **Crucifixion is a Jewish death sentence;**
- **Both killing by hanging or hanging after killing were used by Jews;**
- **Jews considered crucified as cursed;**
- **Jewish rabbinic court sentenced Jesus and on their insistence Jesus was crucified;**
- **Jews consider Jesus cursed being crucified thus do not accept him as their Messiah;**