

# Sigla

## Used in Translation

- < > Pointed brackets indicate a subject, object, or other element implied by the original language and supplied by the translator.
- [ ] Square brackets indicate words which have been restored from a lacuna or emended from a scribal error.
- [...] A lacuna or gap in the manuscript that cannot be satisfactorily restored.
- ( ) Parentheses are used in the usual sense, to indicate parenthetical remarks and narrative asides in the original text.

# Abbreviations

1, 2 Cor	1, 2 Corinthians
Dan	Daniel
Deut	Deuteronomy
Did	Didache
Exod	Exodus
Gal	Galatians
Gen	Genesis
Isa	Isaiah
Jn	John
Lk	Luke
1, 2 Macc	1, 2 Maccabees
Mk	Mark
Matt, Mt	Matthew
Num	Numbers
Pet	Gospel of Peter
Phil	Philippians
POxy	Papyrus Oxyrhynchus
Prov	Proverbs
Ps	Psalms
Q	Sayings Gospel
Rom	Romans
1, 2 Sam	1, 2 Samuel
1 Thess	1 Thessalonians
Thom	Thomas
WisSol	Wisdom of Solomon
Zech	Zechariah
RSV	Revised Standard Version
SV	Scholar's Version



# Introduction

The haunting tradition of the death of Jesus originates out of a raw and fragile trauma. The Roman executioners employed their most vicious means to eradicate a peasant artisan.<sup>a</sup> Crucifixion meant not simply death; it deleted victims from society's memory (see cameo on "Crucifixion," pp. 17–20). The wave of trauma was meant to wash all away. That Jesus was remembered at all speaks to those unknown followers choosing to resist the dissolving protocols of the Empire. How they remembered the death of Jesus is the subject of this book.

From the Alexamenos Graffito in Rome to the *Ten Punching Bags* of Andy Warhol and Jean-Michel Basquiat,<sup>1</sup> from early gospel confabulations to *Jesus Christ Superstar*, from the grotesque death scenes mirroring the Black Death of the late Middle Ages to the gnarled crucifixes carved in contemporary Latin American base communities, for nearly two millennia the death of Jesus of Nazareth has conspicuously concentrated the Christian imagination. Yet, as Werner Kelber astutely observes:

No event in Christian origins is less likely to be transmitted in its factual rawness, and no experience is more in need of mnemonic frames and mediating patterns, than Jesus' death. (Kelber, *The Works of Memory*, 293)

Each succeeding generation has added layer upon layer to the traditions of the unsettling death of Jesus. Ironically these subsequent layers may actually cover up the horror of the original

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a. The reason for the Roman execution is not totally clear. While many scholars presume that Jesus' words and actions provoked the Roman action and that the *titiulus* (*King of the Jews*) indicates the Roman assessment of his revolutionary program, there might not have been such a necessary cause and effect. What can be said is that the Romans did crucify Jesus. That is the historical fact. Why they did is another matter. Moreover, the brunt of this book addresses the very nature of the evidence of his death. We cannot presume that this evidence was intended to provide documentary proof that we moderns obsess over. Few ever contemplate that Jesus' death was incidental or even accidental. To a Roman official the words, acts and reputation of a Jewish peasant were at best a nuisance. From the imperial perspective a peasant's execution was hardly memorable; it was a signal, however, of Roman rule and invincibility. See cameo on "Another Jesus," pp. 29–30.

event. Moreover, contemporary Bible readers often assume that the ways in which they recall situations mirror how the ancients remembered. Such an assumption passes over the texture of the evidence and, with it, some significant clues to the ways in which the early followers of Jesus remembered his death. Thus, this study tries to be alert to the traumatic effect Jesus' death had on his followers and to recognize the need to be attentive to the very texture of the resulting memories of the earliest communities.

Since the eighteenth century the historical imagination has introduced a novel perspective on the death of Jesus. The imaginative categories of time and space furnished a distinctive point of view.<sup>b</sup> Scholars gradually realized that their interpretive horizon differs greatly from that which underlies the writings they examine.<sup>c</sup> They must be attentive not just to a different historical situation but even more to the ways in which the ancients communicated meaning. Critical scholars have removed the death of Jesus from ecclesial wraps and have attempted to place the question of Jesus' fate within a public forum where a variety of critical eyes can consider the evidence. Their endeavor, however, has not stopped many in the churches from dismissing such enterprise. The death of Jesus, embedded in primordial images and emotional overlays, speaks volumes to many churchgoers. Unfortunately, such uncritical acceptance of the "traditional" story of the death of Jesus often has had tragic ramifications. Many churchgoers have been pressed into guilt complexes unwittingly. Most horribly, the very telling

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b. From the amateur observations of the Enlightenment's gentlemen "naturalists" to the more detailed examination of material layers of evidence, the science of Geology came into its own in the nineteenth century. A radically different theory of the formation of the earth emerged to account for the distinctive layers of sediment as well as for the various locations of puzzling fossils. In the early nineteenth century scientists measured the earth in biblical years (four thousand to six thousand years old); by the publication of the *Origin of Species* they spoke in terms of millions of years. The re-imagining of the temporal dimension greatly ramified scholarship on every level.

c. In brief, when Luther or Aquinas, for example, read the New Testament, neither had the sense that the reader's present differed greatly from that conveyed by the text. There might be some question over the meaning of a word but the solution was not found by referring to a different temporal context. To use a graphic example, consider how mediaeval and Renaissance artists simply put their own clothing and ornamentation into their paintings of a first century subject. No one thought that anachronistic.

of the death story of Jesus has become the occasion (since the late second century) for generating anti-Semitism in the West.<sup>d</sup> Salvation by the blood of the Lamb has had its price, a very human price.

Quite recently the public debate over the question of the historical Jesus has resumed the Enlightenment's agenda. The Jesus Seminar has gone on record, publishing their attempts to detect the historicity of the death of Jesus.<sup>2</sup> Yet what is clear from the present debate is that many, both scholars and believers, still share a common presupposition of the tradition of the death of Jesus. *They assume that the tradition delivers a report of what actually happened.*<sup>e</sup> Such a position is found not only among most conservative scholars. While admitting that the gospel evidence is more complicated than what a literalist would allow, even many liberal scholars assume that one can *plausibly suppose* that some history lies behind the later communities' constructions. This position is both metaphysical and religious. It not only supports the claim to historical fact but also, albeit covertly, is underpinned by religious conviction.

Yet many general readers of the Bible understand the traditions of the death of Jesus in an ahistorical fashion. The overarching narrative (from Genesis to Armageddon) defines the conditions of imagining. The readers have no sense of the consequences of living within the historical imagination. There is little or no regard for the ways in which the stories of the death of Jesus were fabricated and remembered. The readers show little awareness that a distinct cultural background is in play in what appears to be a common foreground. Certainly there is no concern to detect the groping developments that emerged from the various Jesus traditions.

This ahistorical understanding is coupled with an ahistorical self-understanding. Many Bible readers do not realize how

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d. Such anti-Semitism becomes dramatically clear when one considers how the numerous passion plays, performed prior to Easter each year, have a decidedly emotional effect, especially upon young children, unable to filter the turbulent experience (see J. Carroll, *Constantine's Sword*).

e. This assumption is based on what I have called "the Markan default." Even when scholars consider the relationship among the gospels, they assume that the narrative of the earliest canonical gospel reflects historical events. As we shall see below, that assumption is quite problematic. See cameo on "Temple Incident," pp. 94–97.

complicated they are. They do not suspect that they are actually engaged in interpreting the fate of Jesus, effectively extending and transmuting the present moving tradition. Rather, they overlook their own role in interpreting the gospels, which they assume are fixed scripts. Their task becomes one of simple, neutral transmission. Such an assumption allows readers to evade the obvious: the historical responsibility of those who convey and are concerned about the tradition. They try to avoid at all costs the realization that such storytelling of Jesus' death cannot prevent their own demise. Many live vicariously through the "blood of Jesus," allowing the hero to die for them. They use this passion tradition to serve as a firewall to the obscene incursions of history and human mortality.<sup>3</sup>

But in this ahistorical understanding lies something even more insidious. Uncritical reading permits the maintenance of past and present power already in play. It gives no consideration to ones who define the terms of the discourse or to what the discourse permits to be heard. Do we want to admit that within the very texture of the text there might be embedded a *servile consciousness*? Given the long-standing biblical tradition, we are reluctant to question how the passion story has reached us. Under what conditions was it then and is it now transmitted? Can we freely interrogate it? Could we detect whether an uncritical reading of the story unwittingly echoes the power play that liquidated Jesus? Do we abrogate responsibility as readers by accepting the texts as innocent reports of what had happened?<sup>4</sup>

This book proposes to re-read the traditions of the death of Jesus by asking how the various Jesus communities remembered the death of Jesus. The arguments and conclusions of the Jesus Seminar will be taken seriously in the discussion.<sup>f</sup> The Seminar has resisted the usual reading of the passion narratives as factual reports by maintaining that the burden of proof rests upon those who claim authenticity for the words and deeds of Jesus. But the Jesus Seminar did not depart significantly from the mainline biblical scholarship on the death of Jesus. In fact, the Seminar replicated many of the results of redaction criticism in concluding that the narratives of the death of Jesus reflected

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f. For a detailed review of the Seminar's findings, see Appendix A.

the concerns of the later gospel community.<sup>8</sup> Ever vigilant against a “congenial Jesus,” the Seminar was alert to the later constructions of the different communities. My colleagues in the Seminar nevertheless tended to work upon an unspoken assumption, namely that the Markan passion narrative reflected some historical basis. Ironically, when the specific passages of the Markan passion narrative were considered individually, very little survived as historical.<sup>5</sup> My own research into the Gospel of Peter had led me to discover how ancient memory worked. This provided me with the critical tools to see how narrative material was woven. I saw the possibility of how the death traditions were constructed and transmitted. This led me to see that our modern assumptions actually prevented a critical understanding of what the ancient evidence was attempting to express.

A simpler way of saying this is that research into the death of Jesus is not a simple reflection of one’s desires. In fact, a critical reading of the death traditions of Jesus can help us view the death of Jesus in human terms other than our own thereby gaining an appreciation of the unsung human efforts that went into such constructive remembering.

As we shall see, a historical reconsideration of the traditions of the death of Jesus dislocates any hard and facile understanding of Jesus’ fate. Rather than serving as reliable reports, the passion narratives express the creative registers of each historical community. What can be gleaned from the earliest layers of the traditions will surprise the conventional appraisal of the death of Jesus. Not all followers of Jesus were preoccupied with his death. At least twenty years went by before we have any indication that there was a need to construct an overarching narrative to Jesus’ fate. Even then, it was still not a universal concern in the developing traditions. We shall further see that the death story of Jesus is eventually constructed along the

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g. Where the Jesus Seminar dramatically differed from many contemporary scholars was in asking whether specific passages in the passion narratives were historical. Many scholars work upon the argument of plausibility: If the passage appears plausible, given certain historical and cultural understandings, then it is likely. What is usually overlooked is that plausibility is not probability. For more on this see cameos on “A Case of True Fiction?” pp. 87–88 and “The Temple Incident—Fact or Fiction,” pp. 94–97.

mythic lines of a well-known Jewish narrative frame and that this construction arises out of a concern for the destiny of those in the later communities rather than simply for the fate of Jesus.

Today we cannot presume that the death story of Jesus has any automatic currency for the global community. So many death narratives haunt our world. Indeed, such a presumption would come from a neo-colonial employment of the tradition and is tone deaf to the innumerable cries of suffering. In fact, the experience of many pastors and theologians points to the folly of such a position. They have found that the use of the story of Jesus' death in an exclusivist fashion prevents an understanding of the story tradition within a liberating perspective.

Instead of such presumption the post-modern interpreter must risk the chance that there is no meaning whatsoever. It might well be that the hope of setting the tradition free will come only by patiently listening again to those unknown voices of the first century and by recognizing that their very human attempts may echo the hopes of untold millions around the globe.

### **Coda\***

#### **The Blasphemy of Art**

Some years ago, far outside the gated community of theological discourse, a remarkable religious display went on international tour. Madonna, the pop diva and recent Kabbalah devotee, cut a triumphant swath around the globe and with it drew condemnations from every religious authority in her wake.

The Church of England worried aloud why such a talented person would need to offend so many people, while Vatican spokesmen vented their spleen on such blasphemy. Even Danes and Russians agreed on someone to censure. Wherever Madonna went, from Los Angeles to London, from Rome to Düsseldorf, from Horsens to Moscow, religious leaders tried to pre-empt her arrival. But to no avail. Predictably, she played everywhere to sold-out venues.

\*Throughout this book the reader will find six reflections entitled "coda." They present other perspectives on the material under investigation. Each one suggests that the matter of the Suffering Innocent One is not far from our shared experience.

What was the breach of religious decorum in her international *Confessions* tour? At one point in her show, Madonna re-emerged on a mammoth disco crucifix wearing a crown of thorns to perform the song "Live to Tell." Suspended on the giant cross encrusted with Swarovski crystals, she devoted her song to African victims of AIDS. It could have been more provocative but Madonna had no "wardrobe malfunction." A salmon blouse, with her blond hair down, black jeans and boots, cut a demure figure.

This was actually a tame image. Years ago, Edwina Sandys sent her four-foot bronze statue of "Christa," a bare-breasted, wide-hipped woman, on a decades-long tour around the world. St. John's Cathedral in New York was only one among many locales that took a great amount of heat for displaying it.

Then there are the haunting words of Billie Holiday:

Black bodies swinging in the southern trees  
fruit hanging from poplar trees  
Pastoral scene of the gallant south  
The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth.  
(*"Strange Fruit,"* Lewis Allan)

Until she died in 1959, she continued to bring the tremulous reality of the crucified to the shadows of a segregated society.

Artists have understood—long before and better than theologians—that the crucified one has entered into the global domain. The memory of the death of Jesus has long since leaked out of the ecclesial ghettos.

Artists have intuited that crucifixion was a primary metaphor—not to be written about since it was so degrading. It signified the dominating power of the Empire; an unspoken threat to those who would dare to rise up.

Throughout history artists have not settled for a factoid memory of the death of Jesus. The history of Western Art attests to the creative remembering of the death of Jesus. This did not simply mean populating the death scene with friends and patrons. The varied tradition suggests that, just like the earlier gospel writers, artists continued to inflect the death of Jesus in meaningful directions. We can see this already, for example, in a thirteenth-century corpus that sags under the weight of

torture, or in Grünewald's stark figure that sums up much of his plagued and war-torn world.

More recently, the *Ten Punching Bags* by Andy Warhol and Jean-Michel Basquiat carries on this tradition by delivering a telling exposé of the death-dealing effects surrounding the Jesus tradition.

Artists in their own ways continue to let us in on that dirty little secret of domination through controlled violence. And then they note the twist to the tale. The lost one, the zero, becomes a point of identification and solidarity. Something human is detected in the very midst of the forces of domination and dissolution. The voice considered silenced gains new strength and new legs.

Even the awkward appearance of Madonna plays upon this creative remembering. But other artists and images prove to be more poignant. Remembering the dominating downbeat behind the death of Jesus can continue to expose the violence in a situation. It also can detect hints of humanity where none would be found. It can become a tool, an imaginative vehicle for reframing the human condition.

Consider what most of us have quickly consigned to oblivion: the cruciform, hooded figure standing helpless in the prison of Abu Graib. Why is this not an image of veneration? Tasteless? Unpleasant? Does it not bring us back to the breaking point of power?

# 1

## How Little There Is

### The Lack of Material Evidence

Let us begin our investigation with a most puzzling observation. Despite what appears to be a longstanding preoccupation with the death of Jesus throughout the centuries, *no iconographic evidence featuring the death of Jesus is found until the fifth century*. In his thoroughgoing study, *Ante Pacem*, Graydon Snyder<sup>1</sup> has noted that, while images of Jesus as a healer and teacher can be found, we have no images of the death of Jesus from the first four centuries. Such an observation is rather jarring, since, by the beginning of the second century, significant narratives of the death of Jesus are circulating in the tradition. Why do images of Jesus as wise teacher and healer emerge in the iconographic evidence? Are they telltale hints of where the popular tradition was going? Did they speak more forcefully to various communities than the death narratives? Or, was there a general reluctance to embody the crucifixion concretely due to its traumatic effect and associations?

There are two possible exceptions to Snyder's findings.<sup>2</sup> The first is the lampooning Alexamenos graffito dated to the late second–early third century. The graffito shows a man standing in front of a donkey-headed victim on a T-shaped cross. The Greek text scrawls “Alexamenos worships his god.” This mocking carving may well represent either an anti-Jewish<sup>a</sup> or an anti-Jesus slur. The second is a carved gemstone amulet from Syria (third century CE). The bloodstone intaglio shows a crucified Jesus, tied to a T-shaped cross. The Greek text invokes: “Son,

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a. A lingering slur upon the cult of Israel was that the Jews did not permit non-Jews to approach the Holy of Holies because they actually worshipped an ass.

Father, Jesus Anointed.” It would have been used as a magical protection for the wearer. Indeed, both exceptions actually sustain Snyder’s assertion of the dearth of iconographic evidence for the death of Jesus. The first runs sharply against the developing Jesus traditions, as it denigrates the crucified victim. In a certain perverse fashion it echoes the shameful intent of the executioners as it continues the social stigmatization they originally intended. The amulet, on the other hand, reduces the crucified figure and his name to an apotropaic (“turning away”) instrument, magically warding off evil. Neither piece plays into the developing narrative material of the death of Jesus. Instead they provide tantalizing slivers of popular prejudice and fears. Thus, it would seem that the oral and literary traditions were the sole avenues through which the memory of the death of Jesus was transmitted.

Second, a fundamental social reality cannot be neglected. We can find little mention, let alone description, of crucifixion in ancient literature. Crucifixion was reserved for slaves and rebels; it was hardly considered worthy of taking up space on a costly scroll. There are, however, indirect hints of what this entailed, such as in the Gemma Augustea. In this brooch we find the divine Augustus sitting on Zeus’s throne, flanked in glory by the Goddess Roma, while at the bottom left, a captured Dacian is about to be shamed and possibly executed and exhibited upon a trophy pole. This fine piece of jewelry gives a clear indication of how the power relationships within the First Century World were maintained and enforced through humiliation and torture. Cicero (106–43 BCE) breaks the literary silence on crucifixion by declaring that death by crucifixion should not be considered, let alone remembered:

The very name of ‘the cross’ should be absent not only from the body of Roman citizens but even from thought, eyes, and ears. For of all these things not only the occurrence and endurance but even the [legal] possibility, expectation, and finally the mention itself is unworthy of a Roman citizen and a free person. (Cicero, “The speech in defense of Gaius Rabirius”)

Cicero, in fact, speaks to the social atmosphere surrounding the act of crucifixion. While the Romans did not invent crucifixion, they were adept in applying it. It served as a legal and social weapon to strike fear into those they ruled. It was reserved

End Of Book Sample

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