

# Stones, Bones, and the Cross

*Archaeology behind the Gospels, and the historical certainty of the crucifixion*

Faith is not asked to float free of the world. The Gospels make claims that touch dirt and stone — a census in a particular province, a man nailed to a beam of olive wood, a tomb sealed with a rolling stone, two pools in a particular city. Claims like that can be tested, and over the last century and a half the spade has been turned in the very places the Gospels name.

This week we walk the ground. We are not going to overclaim — archaeology rarely "proves" a verse, and most of what we will see is background that quietly fits, rather than headlines that shout. But the fit is real, and at one point it is more than background: the death of Jesus by crucifixion is one of the best-attested facts in all of ancient history. We will look at the stones, then at the bones, and finally at the cross itself, asking the oldest skeptical question of all — did Jesus really die?

## THE BOOK

Gary Habermas, *The Historical Jesus* — Chapter 8, "Archaeological Sources." Habermas is careful: archaeology here is a supporting witness, not the star witness.

## THE AIM

To see how the physical record corroborates the Gospel narrative, and to test the crucifixion against the historian's tools — without claiming more than the evidence will bear.

Begin where the story begins — with a tax. Luke says a decree of Caesar Augustus sent Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem to be enrolled (Luke 2:1-5), "when Quirinius was governor of Syria." Critics have long pressed two questions: did people really have to return to their home city, and was Quirinius actually in charge of Syria that early?

A Latin inscription known as the **Titulus Venetus** records a census in Syria and Judea around AD 5-6, and shows such enrollments were typical across the empire from Augustus onward, recurring at roughly fourteen-year intervals. An Egyptian papyrus from AD 104 reports the very practice of returning to one's home district for the count. As for Quirinius, the archaeologist **Sir William Ramsay** discovered inscriptions indicating he governed Syria on two occasions — the first several years before his well-known governorship of AD 6, which would place an earlier census comfortably within the window of Jesus' birth.

None of this is dramatic. It is simply that, where Luke can be checked, the world he describes turns out to be the real one.

**Yohanan Ben Ha'galgol** *Jerusalem, June 1968*

*"Still piercing his feet was a large nail about seven inches long that had been driven sideways through his heel bones... The radius bone was both scratched and actually worn smooth... apparently due to repeated friction caused by the crucifixion victim pulling himself upward in order to breathe."*

For nearly two thousand years the cross was known only from texts. Then a workman's shovel found one.

In June 1968, about a mile north of the Old Damascus Gate, construction crews uncovered an ancient Jewish burial site. Among some thirty-five skeletons reburied in stone ossuaries, one bore an Aramaic name — **Yohanan Ben Ha'galgol**, a man of about twenty-five who had been crucified, probably during the Jewish revolt around AD 70. A seven-inch iron nail was still driven through his heel bones, pinning what had been an acacia crossbeam.

The skeleton is a textbook in the mechanics of crucifixion. The smoothed, scratched arm bone tells of a body hauling itself upward again and again, because in the slumped position the chest muscles seize and the lungs cannot empty — the victim must push up to breathe, then sink back,

until he can push no longer. And Yohanan's lower leg bones were broken, crushed by a single blow. That is the dreaded Roman *crucifragium* — the breaking of the legs to hasten death by stealing the victim's last ability to lift himself and draw breath. It is exactly the procedure John describes at the cross (John 19:31-32).

**A note of care.** Some specialists (J. Zias and E. Sekeles) later disputed parts of the original analysis of Yohanan's remains. But the central facts stand: this man was nailed through the heel, and Roman crucifixion worked by asphyxiation, with leg-breaking used to speed death. That much the bones still testify.

**The Nazareth Decree** *Marble slab found at Nazareth, ordinance of Claudius (AD 41-54)*

*"Ordinance of Caesar. It is my pleasure that graves and tombs remain perpetually undisturbed... In case of violation I desire that the offender be sentenced to capital punishment on charge of violation of sepulchre."*

Earlier Roman edicts of this kind prescribed only a fine. This one demands death. Why such severity, and why in Palestine?

No one can be certain what prompted the emperor to make grave-robbing a capital crime in this corner of the empire. But the timing is striking. Claudius expelled the Jews from Rome around AD 49 over disturbances that the historian Suetonius says were instigated by "Christ." It is at least plausible that, investigating these troubles, the emperor heard both the Christian claim that Jesus' tomb was found empty and the counter-rumor that the disciples stole the body — and that the decree's pointed concern with disturbed, sealed tombs (compare Matthew 27:66) is an echo of that very controversy. We cannot prove the connection. We can say the decree fits the world the Gospels describe, where a sealed tomb and a missing body had already become a matter of public dispute.

Two more finds put faces and places to the narrative. Pontius **Pilate** — the man who condemned Jesus — was long known only from texts, until coins minted to honor his rule (dated AD 30-31) and a stone inscription bearing his name were recovered at Caesarea. The historical link between

Pilate and Jesus' crucifixion was already firm in Tacitus and Josephus; now the governor's own name stands carved in stone.

And the settings of two of Jesus' healings have been found. The pools of **Bethesda** and **Siloam**, Habermas notes, "can be identified with certainty." Their existence proves no miracle — but John tells of a healing at each (John 5:1-9; 9:1-41), and the Evangelist turns out to have known the topography of his own city exactly.

## DID JESUS REALLY DIE?

---

Everything in the Christian message rests downstream of a hard fact: a dead man cannot be raised unless he was first truly dead. The oldest naturalistic dodge tries to slip out right here. It is called the **swoon theory** — the idea that Jesus did not die on the cross but only fainted, revived in the cool of the tomb, and stumbled out, so that his disciples mistook a survivor for a risen Lord.

The decisive answer came not from a defender of the faith but from a critic of it. **David Strauss**, himself a liberal theologian, dismantled the theory to the satisfaction of his fellow scholars. Even granting the impossible — that a scourged, crucified man could survive — Strauss pressed the real point: what kind of impression would such a man make? He would arrive at the disciples limping, bleeding, pale, clutching his side, plainly in desperate need of a physician.

*"...he would obviously be in need of physical assistance and, at any rate, would not appear to be the resurrected and glorified Lord of Life! As Strauss pointed out, the disciples would have gone for a doctor's help rather than proclaim Jesus the risen Son of God!"*

— Gary Habermas summarizing David Strauss's critique of the swoon theory

A half-dead man crawling from a grave might inspire pity, or a search for bandages. He could never have launched the proclamation that Jesus was the conquering Lord of Life. Strauss's argument was so telling that Albert **Schweitzer**, early in the twentieth century, called it the

"**death-blow**" to the rationalistic "lives of Jesus." After Strauss, the liberal biographers quietly dropped the swoon theory; critics came to regard it as a museum piece.

Modern medicine has only hardened the verdict. Crucifixion *is* death by asphyxiation: hanging in the "down" position, a man cannot clear his lungs, and one cannot fake the inability to breathe. The very fact that Jesus' legs were *not* broken — unlike Yohanan's — is the Roman soldiers' own certification that he was already dead; otherwise the standard leg-breaking would have finished him. And then the spear. The Roman lance entered Jesus' chest, and "blood and water" flowed (John 19:34) — a detail the Evangelist records without grasping its medical meaning, and which doctors recognize as a precise description of fluid from the pericardium and blood from the heart. Even had Jesus somehow lived to that moment, the lance through the heart would have killed him. Three separate lines of evidence — Strauss's argument, the mechanics of asphyxiation, and the heart wound — converge on a single conclusion. Jesus was dead.

## THE BEST-ATTESTED DEATH IN ANTIQUITY

---

### 28 of 45

ancient sources that mention Jesus refer to his death — 12 of them non-Christian. Of all the events of his life, more sources record his death than any other single occurrence.

Pause on that. Across the ancient sources that speak of Jesus — Christian and non-Christian, friendly and hostile — his death is the most frequently mentioned event of his entire life. Twenty-eight of forty-five report it, twelve of them from outside the church, and fourteen add specific details: the politics of his execution, the rulers of the day, the medical and religious particulars. A Roman historian had no devotional reason to record a Galilean's execution; that so many did is its own kind of testimony. As Habermas puts it, "it is fair to assert that this is one of the best-attested facts in ancient history."

## "PIERCED FOR OUR TRANSGRESSIONS"

---

Long before the spade or the scalpel, the prophet Isaiah saw it. Here is the Suffering Servant in the Septuagint — the Greek Old Testament the early church read — beside the English. The stones and bones tell us how Jesus died. Isaiah tells us why.

#### SEPTUAGINT (LXX) · ISAIAH 53:4-6

4 οὗτος τὰς ἀμαρτίας ἡμῶν φέρει καὶ περὶ ἡμῶν ὀδυνᾶται, καὶ ἡμεῖς ἐλογισάμεθα αὐτὸν εἶναι ἐν πόνῳ καὶ ἐν πληγῇ καὶ ἐν κακώσει.

5 αὐτὸς δὲ ἐτραυματίσθη διὰ τὰς ἀνομίας ἡμῶν καὶ μεμαλάκισται διὰ τὰς ἀμαρτίας ἡμῶν· παιδεία εἰρήνης ἡμῶν ἐπ' αὐτόν, τῷ μώλωπι αὐτοῦ ἡμεῖς ἰάθημεν.

6 πάντες ὡς πρόβατα ἐπλανήθημεν, ἄνθρωπος τῇ ὁδῷ αὐτοῦ ἐπλανήθη· καὶ κύριος παρέδωκεν αὐτὸν ταῖς ἀμαρτίαις ἡμῶν.

#### ENGLISH STANDARD VERSION · ISAIAH 53:4-6

4 Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted.

5 But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed.

6 All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

The nail through Yohanan's heel, the smoothed arm bone, the unbroken legs, the spear, the empty-tomb controversy frozen in marble — all of it lands on a single sentence written seven centuries before the event: "he was pierced for our transgressions." The cross is not first a historical puzzle to be solved. It is a gift to be received. But it is a gift offered in real history, on real ground, by a man who really died.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

---

1. Habermas treats archaeology as background that "helps confirm" the Gospels rather than as standalone proof. Why is that a more honest — and ultimately stronger — way to use such evidence than overclaiming?
2. Yohanan's bones reveal that crucifixion killed by asphyxiation and that legs were broken to hasten death. How does that physical detail strengthen the case that Jesus — whose legs were *not* broken — was already dead when the soldiers checked?
3. David Strauss, a critic of orthodox Christianity, delivered the "death-blow" to the swoon theory. What does it mean for our confidence that the decisive argument came from a skeptic rather than a believer?
4. Of all the events in Jesus' life, his death is the most-mentioned in the ancient sources, including twelve non-Christian ones. Why might his executioners and opponents have had as much reason to record it as his followers did?
5. Isaiah 53 was written centuries before the cross. How does moving from the *how* of Jesus' death (the stones and bones) to the *why* (Isaiah's "for our transgressions") change the way you read this evidence?

## CLOSING PRAYER

---

*Father, you did not hide your Son's death in legend or leave it to be argued away. You let it happen on solid ground, before witnesses friendly and hostile, in stone and bone and the records of nations. We thank you that the cross is not a myth we must defend but a fact we may rest upon. As we have traced the nail, the wound, and the unbroken legs, let us not stop at the mechanics but bow at the meaning: he was pierced for our transgressions, and by his wounds we are healed. Like sheep we had gone astray, each to his own way; thank you for laying on him the iniquity of us all. Make this history our hope, and this hope our home. In the name of Jesus, who truly died and truly rose, Amen.*

[↓ Download this lesson \(PDF\)](#)

[← Week 3](#)

[All 6 weeks](#)

[Week 5 →](#)

## Pleasant Springs Church — Discipleship School

[Series Home](#)

[Statement of Beliefs](#)

[Plan a Visit](#)