

DID JESUS DIE ON A “CROSS?”

This question would seem so elementary to most of us, that we might wonder why someone would even raise it. Why would anyone even teach anything else when the scriptures seem so clear? (Luke 23:6; Matt. 27:32; John 19:17) The question is generated by the teaching of the group known as the “Jehovah’s Witnesses.” They say that it was merely a stake or pole that Jesus died on. In the above scriptures they translate cross as “torture stake,” (New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures). They do this because the Catholic Church has made the cross into an icon. When there is false teaching in the world people need not over react and end up teaching error to counter error. This is what the Jehovah’s Witnesses have done.

The Jehovah’s Witnesses say that the words translated cross in the New Testament merely mean “stake or pole” and thus do not indicate the idea of a cross. So it would require us to look at the words and find out what they do mean. There are two words that are translated cross in the NASB, they are “*stauros*” and “*xulon*”. The word “*stauros*” means: “a stake or post (as set upright), i.e. (specifically) a pole or cross (as an instrument of capital punishment); figuratively, exposure to death, i.e. self-denial; by implication the atonement of Christ.” The word “*xulon*” means: “timber (as a fuel or material); by implication a stick, club or tree or other wooden article or substance” (NASB; clubs, tree, cross, stocks, wood) (The above definitions are from “Strong’s Greek Definitions”) Now what does all this do for us? Are the Jehovah’s Witnesses correct? These definitions only let us know that these words can be used in several ways and must be defined both by the context and the history of the times.

I want to explore the word “*stauros*” closer as it is the word used most often to designate the form of capital punish used to kill Jesus. Note that Strong’s included in his definition of “*stauros*”, “as an instrument of capital punishment.” So in the case of this word it should be defined by what history tells us was the form or instrument of capital punishment during the time that Jesus lived and died. Nelson’s Bible Dictionary under an article entitled “Crucifixion of Christ” says:

“The method of torture and execution used by the Romans to put Christ to death. At a crucifixion the victim usually was nailed or tied to a wooden stake and left to die.

Crucifixion was used by many nations of the ancient world, including Assyria, Media, and Persia. Alexander the Great of Greece crucified 2,000 inhabitants of Tyre when he captured the city. The Romans later adopted this method and used it often throughout their empire. Crucifixion was the Romans’ most severe form of execution; so it was reserved only for slaves and criminals. No Roman citizen could be crucified.

Crucifixion involved attaching the victim with nails through the wrists or with leather thongs to a crossbeam attached to a vertical stake. Sometimes blocks or pins were put on the stake to give the victim some support as he hung suspended from the crossbeam. At times the feet were also nailed to the vertical stake. As the victim hung dangling by the arms, the blood could no longer circulate to his vital organs. Only by supporting himself on the seat or pin could the victim gain relief.

But gradually exhaustion set in, and death followed, although usually not for several days. If the victim had been severely beaten, he would not live this long. To hasten death, the executioners sometimes broke the victim’s legs with a club. Then he could no longer support his body to keep blood circulating, and death quickly followed. Usually bodies were left to rot or be eaten by scavengers.”

Clearly history tells us that the Roman form of crucifixion was that of placing an individual on what would become the cross member by nailing or tying the arms to that cross member then the cross member would be raised and attached to a pole or stake in the ground. Neither Hebrew nor the Greek had a word that would translate clearly this form of capital punishment. Only Latin had a word that clearly spoke of this form of capital punish and that was “*crux*.” During the time that the New Testament was written the term “*stauros*” was commonly used to translate the Latin “*crux*.” The “cross” was the historical instrument of capital punishment used by the Roman Empire. When anyone denies that Jesus died on a cross they are denying what clearly the scriptures and history teaches us about the times.

John 19:17-40

“They took Jesus therefore, and He went out, bearing His own **cross**, to the place called the Place of a Skull, which is called in Hebrew, Golgotha. 18 There they crucified Him, and with Him two other men, one on either side, and Jesus in between. 19 And Pilate wrote an inscription also, and put it on the **cross**. And it was written, "JESUS THE NAZARENE, THE KING OF THE JEWS." 20 Therefore this inscription many of the Jews read, for the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city; and it was written in Hebrew, Latin, and in Greek.” NASB

E.S.