

What do we really know about the crucifixion of Jesus?

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The many different accounts of the crucifixion of Jesus find little support in historical sources. The reason is that antique sources generally lack descriptions of crucifixions, says Gunnar Samuelsson, University of Gothenburg, Sweden, who recently finished his doctoral thesis on the topic.

Encyclopaedias, monographs and [bible](#) commentaries generally agree on the type of punishment Jesus had to endure on Golgotha in Jerusalem. There is an ample amount of very colourful accounts of crucifixions in the literature, and researchers from all kinds of disciplines seem to endorse them.

'The problem is that descriptions of crucifixions are remarkably absent in the antique literature,' says Samuelsson. 'The sources where you would expect to find support for the established understanding of the event really don't say anything.'

The 400 page thesis offers the reader samples of antiquity's most terrifying texts and gives examples of mankind's amazing resourcefulness in terms of mind-boggling cruelty against fellow human beings. Samuelsson has studied the available ancient Greek, Latin and Hebrew/Aramaic literature all the way from Homer to the first century A.D. While the texts indicate a vast arsenal of suspension punishments, they do not say much about the kind of punishment the Christian tradition claims Jesus was forced to endure.

The thesis shows that although the studied texts are full of references to suspension of objects and the equipment used to this end, no reference is made to 'crosses' or 'crucifixion'. Samuelsson therefore concludes that the predominant account of the destiny of Jesus is not based on the antique texts, but rather on for example the tradition of the Christian church and artistic illustrations.

'Consequently, the contemporary understanding of crucifixion as a punishment is severely challenged. And what's even more challenging is that the same can be concluded about the accounts of the crucifixion of Jesus. The New Testament doesn't say as much as we'd like to believe', says Samuelsson.

Provided by University of Gothenburg

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