

Why does - Golgotha - mean “place of the skull” (Matthew 27:33)?

<https://www.gotquestions.org/place-of-the-skull.html>

As Matthew recounts Jesus’ crucifixion, he describes that “they came to a place called Golgotha (which means ‘the place of the skull’)” (Matthew 27:33). Matthew doesn’t directly answer the question of why Golgotha means “place of the skull,” but he uses the term Golgotha, which was “the Aramaic name of a hill near Jerusalem where executions took place” (Louw, J. P., and Nida, E. A., Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains, United Bible Societies, 1996, p. 834). Luke references the crucifixion site as “the place called The Skull” (Luke 23:33), or more literally, “the place called Kranion”—the general Greek term for “skull.” What Matthew writes in Aramaic, Luke recounts in Greek, as both languages were commonly used among the people in Israel in that day.

Luke, like Matthew, offers no direct explanation why the name of the location means “place of the skull,” but his use of the Greek kranion, along with Matthew’s use of Golgotha, might be indicative of a location that somewhat resembled a skull and was named for its appearance, or the term could simply reference a place of death, as it appears this was a common crucifixion site for criminals.

John also makes note of the location where Jesus was crucified, adding that “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. There they crucified Him” (John 19:17-18a, NASB). John first uses the Greek kranion and then clarifies that in Hebrew the name was Golgotha. While John provides both terms in his description, he does not address the question of why Golgotha means “place of the skull.”

Mark provides the most direct answer to the question of why Golgotha means “place of the skull,” as he recounts that “they brought Him to the place Golgotha, which is translated, Place of a Skull” (Mark 15:22, NASB). From Mark’s account, we may understand the place to simply be named Golgotha and that the association with the skull was merely a translation, but of course that would still not provide an answer as to why the name Golgotha was used in the first place. Because the exact location is unknown, the place may not be observed today to determine whether the terrain resembles a skull, nor is there additional historical documentation explaining why this location was the place of the skull.

It is worth noting that, in later Latin translations, the term calva was used, translating the Greek and Aramaic terms for “skull” with the Latin equivalent, and the term Calvary has become a commonly identified name to reference the place where Jesus was crucified. Both Golgotha and Calvary have become part of popular Christian vocabulary, though Golgotha seemed to be in wider use in the early church (see, for example, the ancient Coptic hymn “Golgotha”). The term Calvary is usually preferred in more contemporary usage (for example, in Jennie Evelyn Hussey’s 1921 hymn “Lead Me to Calvary”).

While we are never told in the pages of Scripture exactly why Golgotha was called the “place of the skull,” the imagery of that name sets a sober mood for our recalling that our Savior died there, paying the price for our sin. That imagery reminds that He conquered death, rising from the dead victorious and able to give us eternal life.