

# Was Jesus Christ hanged on a cross or tree?

This erroneous belief that our Saviour Jesus Christ was crucified on a cross has given rise to superstitious tendencies and practices in Christendom for which there can be no scriptural justification. According to the Scriptures, the instrument upon which Christ was hanged and which in the Gospels is sometimes termed cross; was in fact a tree or piece of wood. And to venerate the cross is idolatrous.

Today, the cross is made an object of worship in the circles of many who profess to be Christians. It is believed by some that the cross is efficacious against poison, witchcraft, and so on. And there are those who make on their person the sign of the cross. In some Church buildings it occupies a conspicuous place; it is carried aloft during certain religious processions; at funerals it also has a part to play: It is worn on the chest by bishops and some others, suspended about the neck by a chain or cord; and it is engraved on tomb-stone.

There seem to be a competition these days among some Church denominations as to which of them is able to display the biggest cross. The inspiring mind will want to know the scriptural basis for these beliefs and practices concerning the cross. All Churches agree that the Holy Bible is the Guide Book provided by God to which reference must be made on any point of doctrine and on other aspects of the Christian way of life.

James Cardinal Gibbons, a powerful authority in Roman Catholicism, wrote in his book *The Faith of Our Fathers*: "The Cross is held in the highest reverence by Catholics, because it was the instrument of our Saviour's crucifixion. It surmounts our churches and adorns our sanctuaries. We venerate it as the emblem of our salvation." (Page 2) He further stated: "It is also a very ancient and pious practice for the faithful to make on their person the sign of the Cross, saying at the same time: 'In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.' Tertullian, who lived in the second century of the Christian era, Says: 'In all our actions when we come in or go out, when we dress, when we wash, at our meals, before retiring to sleep,... we form on our foreheads the sign of the cross. These practices are not commanded by a formal law of scripture; but tradition teaches them, custom confirms them, faith observes them.'" – Pages 2-3, (Caps our).

The Catholic Encyclopedic Dictionary edited by Donald Attwater states that the cross is "the most widespread and venerated symbol of the Christian religion because upon a cross of wood our Lord died to redeem the world." Generally, a cross is known to be a stake or post with another piece of wood across it such as the Latin Cross, Greek Cross, Tan Cross and the so called St. Andrew's Cross.

## Traditional View

The traditional view is that Christ was probably crucified on the Latin Cross, though some other Roman Catholic Scholars are more inclined to believe that it was the Tau. The actual cross on which Christ was crucified is said to have been found by Helena, mother of Constantine, in A. D. 326. Concerning this, the Catholic Voice Issue of the Emperor Constantine who had marched to victory under the sign of the Cross and had proclaimed for the first time the legality of the Christian Religion in the Roman Empire, was piously moved to go on pilgrimage to Jerusalem and seek there for the True Cross on which our saviour died. After much search and digging around the Hill of Calvary, three crosses were discovered. Which, if any, was the True Cross? Two of them were placed near a sick man, but nothing happened. Immediately, however, that the third cross was brought near to him he recovered from his illness and was at once restored to health. So, according to this pious tradition, was the True Cross discovered. The Cross was brought to Rome and the practice then arose of sending portions of it to important parts of the Church and to important personages.’ – Page 129

Historically, no story can be of more doubtful truth than that of the so-called “finding of the Cross”. The American Peoples Encyclopedia has this to say: “The tradition of ‘The invention of the Holy Cross’ by Helena conflicts with a still older tradition, according to which the true cross was found during the reign of Tiberius. An attempt during the nineteenth century to reconcile the two legends (by terming Helena’s discovery a ‘rediscovery’) was unconvincing to most scholars.” – Vol. 6, Page 557

If it is true that the actual cross of Christ was found by Helena, why are Roman Catholic theologians and scholars still uncertain as to whether the cross was the Latin or Tau type? The Catholic Encyclopedic Dictionary stated: “Christ’s cross was probably shaped as in Fig. 1 (Latin), though it may have been as in Fig. 6 (Tau).” (Page 129) And The Catholic Concise Encyclopedia stated: “The shape of the cross upon which Christ died is not certainly known, but it is determined that probably it was the T-Form with the upright (*crux immissa*) extending slightly above with room for an inscription (St. Irenaeus).” -Page 117

Viewed against the background of the Scriptures, this legend of the finding of the cross by Helena is of no significance at all to true Christians. It has only served as a device through which the devil has lured innocent, spiritually unlearned men into more idolatrous and sinful practices.

The Addis & Arnold’s Catholic Dictionary states: “From the time that the cross on which Christ died was found by Helena, mother of Constantine, Christians esteemed it a great happiness to possess a particle of its sacred wood. We read in the ‘Peregrinatio Etheriae’ how on Good Friday at Jerusalem the bishop used to tell the people: ‘Be ready here that you may be able to behold the holy wood of the Cross, each one of us believing that it will be profitable to his salvation...’ ‘A silver-gilt casket is brought in which is the wood of the holy Cross...The custom is that the people come one by one and bowing down at the table, kiss the wood and pass on.’” – Page 235 (Emphasis ours)

To bow down or genuflect to a particle of wood – be it the “Cross” of Christ or not – is contrary to God’s commandment in Exodus 20:4-6 and is nothing short of idolatry. Neither Jesus Christ himself nor his apostles gave any intrinsic virtue, and importance was to be attached to it as such the apostles of Jesus Christ should have set the example for other Christians to follow. But it was

Constantine, Emperor of Rome, who made the cross gain popularity in Christendom. He claimed to have seen a vision of the cross in the sky in 312 A.D. and it was his mother who purported to have seen the “true” cross in 326 A.D.

The Bible should be the basis for any Christian teaching or practice. Christians are warned against legends or fables such as that of “the invention the Holy Cross”. St. Paul admonished: “But refuse profane and old wives’ fables, and exercise thyself *rather* unto godliness.” – 1 Timothy 4:7

Lots of things done in Christendom for which they have no scriptural authority are easily covered up in the name of tradition. This was the attitude of the typical Pharisees and Scribes that was condemned by Jesus Christ. He (Christ) told them: “But he answered and said unto them, Why do ye also transgress the commandment of God by your tradition? ...Thus have ye made the commandment of God of none effect by your tradition. Ye hypocrites, well did Esaias prophesy of you, saying, This people draweth nigh unto me with their mouth, and honoureth me with *their* lips; but their heart is far from me. But in vain they do worship me, teaching *for* doctrines the commandments of men.” – Matthew 15:3-9

Now, turning to the Holy Bible, the texts often cited to show that Jesus Christ was crucified on a cross are with reference to the story of the crucifixion in the first four books of the New Testament. St. Matthew, relation how Christ was crucified, stated among other things: “And after that they had mocked him, they took the robe off from him, and put his own raiment on him, and led him away to crucify *him*. And as they came out, they found a man of Cyrene, Simon by name: him they compelled to bear his cross. And they that passed by reviled him, wagging their heads, And saying, Thou that destroyest the temple, and buildest *it* in three days, save thyself. If thou be the Son of God, come down from the cross. Likewise also the chief priests mocking *him*, with the scribes and elders, said, He saved others; himself he cannot save. If he be the King of Israel, let him now come down from the cross, and we will believe him.” – Matthew 27:31, 32, 39-42

Similarly, the word cross is used in the other three books of the New Testament. There is no argument about this. But we must not lose sight of the fact that translators of the Holy Bible did occasionally manifest in their usages of words and expressions their personal prejudices, and bias for certain prevailing dogmas and customs of their times.

Even today, in our time, some translators still harbour prejudices and bias which make them alter, Bible texts to suite their traditional religious beliefs. An instance is The New Testament Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition. The Archbishop of Nepte and Apostolic Delegate to Great Britain – H.E. Cardinal – who wrote the FORWARD to the Catholic edition of the Revised Standard Version under discussion, said: “This Version of the New Testament has been so edited as to make it acceptable to Catholic readers. The Standard Bible Committee of the United States of America is to be thanked warmly for graciously giving consent to such alterations”!

Taken on the surface, the story in the Gospels would mean that Christ was crucified on a cross but getting below the surface, the weight of scriptural evidence is found to be in favour of the fact that he was hanged on a tree. In the light of this the word cross in the context is inappropriate.

It must be borne in mind that long before the Bible was translated into English the cross had been a traditional object of veneration by nominal Christianity believing that it was the instrument of punishment on which Christ died. Between the second and fourth centuries Tertullian and Constantine were among those who made much ado about the cross and contributed to its

installation as a thing of special virtue that must be adored.

According to Benjamin Vincent in his Haydn's Dictionary of dates and Universal Information, "Crosses in churches and chambers were introduced about 431; and set up on steeples about 568." Judging the extent of popularity the cross had gained at the time translations of the Bible began, it is no surprise that translators were influenced by their bias in its usage. Moreover, it is on record that the simplest "form of cross" in ancient times was an upright stake, tree or piece of wood. The idea of a cross-beam fastened at right angles at the top of the stake was later developed.

E. Royston Pike, in his Encyclopedia of Religion and Religions, stated: "The simplest form of cross was an upright stake to which the criminal was bound... From this there were developed by the addition of a cross-piece three main shapes of cross proper..." – Page 115

And The New Bible Dictionary states that "the Greek word for 'cross' means primarily an upright stake or beam, and secondarily a stake used as an instrument for punishment and execution," – Page 279

Can anyone prove from the Bible that the stake on which Christ was crucified had a cross-beam? Or is there any scriptural authority to back the assumption that he was crucified on the Latin or Tau cross? It is all mere imagination and vain tradition.

In an attempt to justify the idea of a cross-piece fastened at right angles below the top of the upright stake, some have made reference to the statement that a title or inscription was written by Pilate and placed above the head of Jesus Christ. This, no doubt, is a weak argument. Is it the title that made or turned the tree or stake into a cross? The Bible shows clearly that the title was quite different from the stake which was improperly termed cross. As it is written: "And Pilate wrote a title, and put *it* on the cross. And the writing was, JESUS OF NAZARETH THE KING OF THE JEWS." – John 19:19

## Eye-Witness

St. Peter who, too, was an eye-witness of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ stated categorically on more than two occasions that he (Christ) was hanged on a tree. He (Peter) and the other apostles, addressing the council of the Jews, declared: "The God of our fathers raised up Jesus, whom ye slew and hanged on a tree. Him hath God exalted with his right hand *to be* a Prince and a Saviour, for to give repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins. And we are his witnesses of these things; and *so is* also the Holy Ghost, whom God hath given to them that obey him." – Acts 5:30-32

The testimony of all the apostles which is of great weight, and which in all honesty was made to those who killed Jesus Christ, makes no reference to cross as the instrument of Christ's execution. On a TREE, not Cross, they all attested to, he was hanged.

On the occasion when Peter the apostle went and spoke to Cornelius and his company as directed by the Lord, he (Peter) also said: "How God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Ghost and with power: who went about doing good, and healing all that were oppressed of the

devil; for God was with him. And we are witnesses of all things which he did both in the land of the Jews, and in Jerusalem; whom they slew and hanged on a tree: Him God raised up the third day, and shewed him openly.” (Acts 20:38-40) Tree in the context with reference to texts just cited does not mean a perennial plant with branches but a piece of wood, beam or stake. The Oxford Universal Dictionary defines tree, among other things, as “a piece of wood, a stem or branch of a tree, a pole, stake, post, beam, wooden bar, etc.” It was the tree or piece of wood improperly or wrongly translated “cross” in the Gospels that one Simon was compelled to carry after Jesus Christ to Calvary.

Furthermore, St. Peter confirmed in his epistle that Christ died on the tree. He stated: “For even hereunto were ye called: because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that ye should follow his steps: Who did no sin, neither was guile found in his mouth: ...Who his own self bare our sins in his own body on the tree, that we, being dead to sins, should live unto righteousness: by whose stripes ye were healed.” – 1 Peter 2:21- 24

There is also the declaration of Paul the apostle that the body of Jesus was taken down from the tree, not cross. He said to the Jews: “Men *and* brethren, children of the stock of Abraham, and whosoever among you feareth God, to you is the word of this salvation sent. For they that dwell at Jerusalem, and their rulers, because they knew him not, nor yet the voices of the prophets which are read every sabbath day, they have fulfilled *them* in condemning *him*. And though they found no cause of death *in him*, yet desired they Pilate that he should be slain. And when they had fulfilled all that was written of him, they took *him* down from the tree, and laid *him* in a sepulchre. But God raised him from the dead.” – Acts 13:26-30

## **Jewish Custom**

The use of the cross as an instrument of execution of criminals was alien to the Jews. The Jewish custom based on the law of God was to hang accursed persons on trees. As it is written: “And if a man have committed a sin worthy of death, and he be to be put to death, and thou hang him on a tree: His body shall not remain all night upon the tree, but thou shalt in any wise bury him that day; (for he that is hanged *is* accursed of God;) that thy land be not defiled, which the LORD thy God giveth thee *for* an inheritance.” – Deuteronomy 21:22, 23

It was on the strength of this law Joshua, after hanging the king of Ai on a tree, commanded that his body should be taken down when the sun had set. He did a similar thing to other fine kings whom he hanged on trees. (Read Joshua 8:28, 29, 10:26-27) Pilate, in treating with the Jews as regard the trial and execution of Jesus Christ, conceded to them their custom. – John 18:39, 19:31-33, 40

Jesus Christ was treated as an accursed person by the ungodly Jews and they executed him by hanging him on a tree in fulfillment of the Scriptures. But God has through this wicked act of the unbelieving Jews brought redemption to all believers. For this reason St. Paul wrote: “Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us: for it is written, Cursed *is* every one that hangeth on a tree:” – Galatians 3:13

There is no scriptural authority to substantiate the view generally held that the cross is a

Christian symbol. Jesus Christ did not give such indication, and his apostles never did. "We usually think of the cross as a symbol of Christ and Christianity, but actually, crosses were used long before Christ was killed on the cross. They have been found as far back as the Stone Age and long before the birth of Jesus they were used all throughout Europe, sometimes on medals and coins. The first time that the cross was used as a Christian symbol was during the reign of Constantine, an early Roman emperor." – Illustrated World Encyclopedia, Vol. 6, Page 1473

The Bible truth which cannot be successfully twisted by biased, misinformed people is that Jesus Christ was not crucified on a cross but was hanged on a tree as testified to by Peter the apostle and his colleagues who were eye-witnesses. – Acts 5:29-32, 10:38-40