

Crucifixion

I have heard some Messianic teachers say that Yeshua was not crucified on a cross. Can you clarify this for me?

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On the whole in the religious world today, the cross has become almost universally recognized as a symbol that identifies people with Yeshua (Jesus) of Nazareth, as the One who was sacrificed for the sins of humanity, and subsequently resurrected from the dead. As seen in both the Apostolic Scriptures and classical antiquity, the *stauros* (σταυρός) was mainly “**a pole to be placed in the ground and used for capital punishment, cross**” (BDAG),¹ which came in a variety of forms, ranging from a standard t- shape to an x-shape, as the process of executing someone by crucifixion was to essentially suffocate them slowly and painfully—being literally “hung out” for public humiliation and shame.

Today’s broad Messianic community has a somewhat unsure relationship with the symbol of the cross, for a variety of reasons. Some feel that with a widely Jewish or Hebraic orientation, Messianic people need to identify more with symbols such as the *menorah*, *mezuzah*, or the Star of David. Others feel that the cross has a great deal of religious “baggage,” as it were, associated with it, from centuries of Christian anti-Semitism and injustice done to the Jewish people, using the cross as an implement—and that when today’s Messianic people emphasize the sacrifice of Yeshua, alternative terminology should be employed. Still, there are some who feel that the symbol of the cross should be integrated, on some level, with the identification of the Messianic movement with its Christian spiritual heritage, in concert with the Star of David representing its Jewish spiritual heritage. And, there are others who consider the cross to be a completely pagan symbol, which has no place in the assembly.

How are Messianics to appropriately approach the symbol of the cross? A useful description of the cross is provided by the *Pocket Dictionary of Liturgy & Worship*:

“A torturous instrument of Roman execution and a *symbol of Christ’s atoning death (Lat. crux; Gk. stauros). Crucifixion was a most reviled and shameful means of death for criminals (cf. Deut 21:23) but it became a symbol of Christianity due to the atoning death of Jesus on a Roman cross at Golgotha, outside of Jerusalem (Gal 3:13). In Christian symbolism the Latin cross has a longer vertical arm...while the Greek cross has arms of equal length... The use of the cross as a symbol was gradual, not to be found in the *catacombs except perhaps for the cross pattern of the *dome of heaven in the cubacula (perhaps making a connection with Jn. 3:14; 8:28; 12:32).”²

There are, to be sure, many forms and derivations of the basic symbol of the cross, seen in a diverse array of Christian churches and culturally Christian traditions the world over. In more customary spiritual terms, the symbol of the cross serves to represent Yeshua’s agony and death for sinners. Yeshua directed His Disciples the ever-critical word, “And he who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me” (Mathew 10:38, NASU).³ The cross, in the words of the Messiah, is hardly some instrument of adornment or decoration for the buildings where His followers meet, or some piece of elaborate jewelry that people wear; the cross is a way of life, that can lead to a person giving up his or her own self unto death, as the cost of emulating Him. The cross, in no uncertain terms, as a means of following the Messiah, is something that is to be an offense to the world at large. *IDB* offers the following useful summary, for people to gauge how the cross has been approached by sincere Christian people wanting to follow the Messiah:

¹ BDAG, 941.

² Brett Scott Provance, *Pocket Dictionary of Liturgy & Worship* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2009), 44.

³ Also Matthew 16:24; Mark 8:34; Luke 14:27.

“As a physical object, Jesus’ cross is, of course, mentioned in all four gospels (Matt. 27:32ff; Mark 15:21ff; Luke 23:26; John 19:17ff), and also at Phil. 2:8; Heb. 12:2. To the orthodox Jew it was inevitably a stumbling block or scandal (Gal. 5:11), for Christians declared that Israel’s long-hoped-for Messiah had indeed come, only to be thus ignominiously executed at Roman hands. To Gentile pagans, likewise, such a proposition was foolishness. As Paul acknowledged, it could not be understood by worldly wisdom (I Cor. 1:17-18). So it became the occasion for persecuting the followers of Christ (Gal. 6:12). Precisely here, however, lay the paradox of Christian belief. Christ’s death on the cross brought salvation for Christian hope (Col. 2:14; cf. Eph. 2:16), and hence was the basis for Christian hope (Col. 1:20). Therefore, it was, for Paul, the only ground on which he might boast (Gal. 6:14). Thus the cross, with all its offensiveness, became the supreme symbol of the new faith.”⁴

Many Messianics have been hesitant to use terms like “cross” or “crucifixion” for any number of reasons. The Complete Jewish Bible, for example, uses the term “execution-stake” instead of cross, and it is not uncommon to also hear the term “tree” being used. While these are perfectly acceptable alternatives to the more common terms “cross” or “crucify,” it by no means negates them. While no one is forcing Messianic people to use a cross as a logo for, or in, their congregation or ministry, or to wear a cross as a religious symbol, much of the Messianic movement, sadly, has an immature attitude when it comes to the symbol of the cross.

Many Messianic Jews, for whatever reason, are offended by the symbol of the cross. Perhaps some of this is due to historical Christian abuses of the Jewish community done in the “sign of the cross,” but the same can be said of just about any religious symbol. While we should be sensitive to those who may not always like the term “cross,” the Apostle Paul himself writes that “we preach Messiah crucified, to Jews a stumbling block and to Gentiles foolishness” (1 Corinthians 1:23, NASU). For Believers in Yeshua, the cross is a bittersweet symbol of the pain and suffering that the Lord endured for us.

History fully attests that many criminals in the Roman Empire were crucified upon some kind of a cross. It was an extremely brutal, humiliating, and painful way to suffer and die. It was intended to serve as a public warning to others not to infuriate the Roman state:

“Under the Roman Empire, crucifixion normally included a flogging beforehand. At times the cross was only one vertical stake. Frequently, however, there was a cross-piece attached either at the top to give the shape of a ‘T’ (*crux comissa*) or just below the top, as in the form most familiar in Christian symbolism (*crux immissa*). The victims carried the cross or at least a transverse beam (*patibulum*) to the place of the execution, where they were stripped and bound or nailed to the beam, raised up, and seated on a *sedile* or small wooden peg in the upright beam. Ropes bound the shoulders or torso to the cross. The feet or heels of the victims were bound or nailed to the upright stake. As crucifixion damaged no vital organs, death could come slowly, sometimes after several days of atrocious pain” (*ABD*).⁵

When it is observed that Simon of Cyrene was impressed to carry the cross of Yeshua (Matthew 27:22; Mark 15:21; Luke 23:26), this could have only been the main beam on which the arms would have been spread out, such a beam being subsequently attached to an upright pole that had already been used for previous executions.

Yeshua’s crucifixion on a cross at Golgotha (Calvary) in the vicinity of Jerusalem was an historical fact.⁶ **You can stand rest-assured that the traditional view of Yeshua being executed on a Roman cross is generally accurate**, even though it was by no means something elaborate or glorified as some Christian portrayals may make it. Crucifixion was common in the First Century world.⁷

But what about some of the Messianic Jewish hesitancy one may find to use terminology like “cross” or “crucify”? This is something that cannot go unrecognized, and any of us—especially non-Jewish Believers who are a part of the Messianic movement—need not be caught using a term like “cross” in the wrong place around Jewish people. *All of us need to be careful about the words we use.* The basic hesitancy toward Messianic Jewish Believers using the symbol of the cross, or even using the term “cross,” is summarized by Paul Liberman, in the early Messianic Jewish work *The Fig Tree Blossoms: The Emerging of Messianic Judaism*:

⁴ Pierson Parker, “Cross,” in *IDB*, 1:745.

⁵ Gerald G. O’Collins, “Crucifixion,” in *ABD*, 1:1208-1209.

⁶ Consult Vassilios Tzaferis, “The Archaeological Evidence for Crucifixion,” in Molly Dewsnap Meinhardt, ed., *Jesus: The Last Day* (Washington, D.C.: Biblical Archaeology Society, 2003), pp 95-100.

⁷ For a further review, consult the sub-section “The Crucifixion and Death of Yeshua,” in the author’s article “The Last Seder and Yeshua’s Passover Chronology,” appearing in the *Messianic Spring Holiday Helper* by Messianic Apologetics.

“[A] point of confusion is that Jewish people assume that all non-Jews of western culture are Christians. Since they are Jewish from birth, they assume one becomes a Christian the same way. Most Jews do not understand that many people go to church and masquerade as Christians but lack the supernatural awakening necessary to become true followers of the Messiah. Since Jewish people are unable to make such a distinction, they take it for granted that all who attend church are believers in the New Covenant. They assume that spiritual viewpoints are determined according to what family a person is born into. It seldom occurs to traditional Jews that it is possible to have a personal encounter with God. Once it is recognized that Jewish people lump together all those under the Catholic and Protestant institutional umbrellas, it is easier to understand why symbols, such as the cross, are distasteful and oppressive to them. Inquisitions, holocausts, and social discrimination reinforce their view. Before Jews can distinguish between true believers and nominal church members, they must have had a personal encounter with God. Yet how can they obtain such experience if believing Gentiles constantly confront them with alien symbols, which prevent them from giving the New Covenant fair evaluation? In order to get a fair hearing, it is reasonable to expect the believer to go out of his way to avoid offending Jewish people. Remember, for almost 2,000 years these church symbols have only driven Jewish people further from their God. The Messianic Jew directs his efforts toward removing these obstacles. He has a built-in incentive to do so. His family and friends haven't gotten into God's program yet. So he carefully tries to remove roadblocks to understanding. For this reason, discussion emphasizes the scriptural Jewishness of these seemingly Gentile concepts.”⁸

These points should be very well taken, as a person needs to always understand the unique needs, perspective, and history of an audience one intends to impact with the good news of the Messiah of Israel (cf. 1 Corinthians 9:20-22). In this case, using an alternative such as “Yeshua was sacrificed on the tree for our sins,” comes across to skeptical Jews much better than “Jesus was crucified.” Still, it does have to be fairly recognized that as the Messianic movement has advanced since the 1960s and 1970s, that there is not a total phobia present over terminology like “cross” or “crucified.” Indeed, the 2011 release of the *Tree of Life Messianic Family Bible—New Covenant* (TLV), includes the terminology of “cross” and “crucified,” unlike the *Complete Jewish Bible* which preceded it. Its glossary, in fact, includes an entry for the verb “crucify”:

“A very cruel form of execution practiced by the Romans, reserved for the worst crimes. It involved nailing or binding the criminal's hands and feet to a cross, on which the criminal hung until he died. (Matthew 20:19; Mark 15:20; John 19:10; Acts 2:36; Hebrews 6:6).”⁹

The more mainstream of the Messianic community expresses hesitancy to use the terminology “cross” and “crucify,” because of the challenges it can present to presenting Jewish people with the good news—not because Yeshua was somehow not executed on a Roman cross. More fringe elements of the Messianic community and/or Hebrew/Hebraic Roots movement, are much less friendly to the symbol of the cross—not because of any Jewish sensitivities—but because of the claim that the cross is an entirely pagan symbol. It is especially claimed that the cross, or forms of the cross, are a widespread symbol of the sun and of sun worship in the Ancient Near East.¹⁰

No one can deny that certainly as a geometric form a cross symbol could represent the sun or solar deities. Concurrent with this, there has probably not been enough temperance present on the part of many Christians, employing the cross as a religious symbol—most especially seen in the Roman Catholic crucifix, with a three-dimensional depiction of the Messiah being executed on it, as a crucifix would sit within the orbit of violating the Second Commandment. Unfortunately, though, at least one resource that has widely circulated throughout the Messianic community (which I have personally witnessed since 1999), the book *Come Out of Her, My People* by C.J. Koster, actually concludes that the cross could be the mark of the beast:

“What is the ‘mark of the beast’ of which we read in Rev[elation]...a mark on people's foreheads and on their right hands?...Different interpretations have been given to the ‘mark of the beast,’ and also the cross has been suggested.”¹¹

If true, these are blasphemous statements designed to trivialize the sufferings that our Lord experienced for us.¹² The fact that Yeshua was crucified on a cross, does not necessarily make the cross a “holy symbol,” per se. The

⁸ Paul Liberman, *The Fig Tree Blossoms: The Emerging of Messianic Judaism* (Kudu Publishing, 2012). [eBook for Amazon Kindle].

⁹ *Tree of Life Messianic Family Bible—New Covenant* (Shippensburg, PA: Destiny Image, 2011), 492.

¹⁰ C.J. Koster, *Come Out of Her, My People* (Northriding, South Africa: Institute for Scripture Research, 1998), pp 29-34; Richard Rives, *Too Long in the Sun* (Charlotte: Partakers Publications, 1998), pp 137-142.

Also some of the observations present in *Vine*, 138.

¹¹ Koster, 34.

cross is, first and foremost, an instrument of death. When Yeshua says “take up your cross and follow Me” (Matthew 10:38; 16:24; Mark 8:34; Luke 9:23), He means that you must follow Him to the point of dying or being martyred—an unpopular subject in just about any religious venue.

It is also important to note that if Yeshua had been executed as solely a Jewish criminal, then He would have been stoned. But Yeshua was not stoned; He was executed by the Romans. This is because the sin of the *entire world*—and not just the Jewish people—was responsible for His death. **We are the ones responsible for Yeshua’s crucifixion, and we should not try to trivialize His death.** Crucifixion is one of the most painful and humiliating forms of execution that humans have ever devised, and those who would try to make Yeshua’s death something that it was not are on extremely dangerous ground.

Today’s Messianic movement does not at all have to widely use the symbol of the cross, especially given the many injustices that have occurred to the Jewish people by supposedly Christian people. Today’s Messianic movement does need to have a mature attitude, though, toward the symbol of the cross as it was used in the First Century world, and the manner by which the Messiah of Israel was sacrificed for the sins of fallen humanity.

¹² Koster, 30 holds to the apparent position that the Messiah was only impaled upon an upright stake, contrary to the widespread academic examination of how Roman criminals were executed upon some kind of a t-shaped or x-shaped cross.
