

Sociocultural, Political and Legal Factors in Execution of Jesus Christ During the Roman Era

Paul Major Elazia, Stephen Wandefu Many, Wanyonyi Michael

Alupe University, Busia, Busia, Kenya

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ABSTRACT

Christianity as a religion developed about 2,000 years ago and crucifixion of Jesus Christ is focal point of its origin as an off-shoot from Jewish religion. The execution of Jesus Christ by crucifixion forms a critical aspect of Christian faith in the resurrection of Jesus. This study explored the reasons why Jesus was not subject to gladiatorial events as a means of his execution and instead crucified. The Conflict Theory guided this study and data collection done through a survey of scholarly articles on the internet. Data analysis was through critical analysis to identify underlying themes and patterns relating to crucifixion and gladiatorial games in ancient Roman empire. The findings of the study demonstrate that Jesus was not eligible for gladiatorial events because he was not a slave nor prisoner of war. His execution by crucifixion was pegged as the best punishment for people who threatened Roman rule. Jesus's offence was labeling himself "King of the Jews" which was sedition. The study's value is that it informs scholars of on the Roman distinction between death via gladiatorial spectacles as entertainment-oriented and death by crucifixion as a punishment for capital offences.

Keywords: Christianity; Crucifixion; Gladiatorial events; Jesus Christ; Resurrection

INTRODUCTION

The history of Christianity began more this a 2,000 years ago, an old story that begins with the birth and crucifixion of Jesus Christ, whose teachings led to the establishment and growth of the Christian religion, affecting billions of people globally (Campbell, 2024). His crucifixion, was due to his conflict with the Rabbis and to some minor extent, the Romans, and Pontius Pilate elected to crucify him under pressure from the Jews. This crucifixion is the focal point that is considered the beginning of the Christian faith because it is the belief that Jesus Christ rose from the dead and ascended to heaven that forms the basis of the Christian faith, forming the Christian traditions, beliefs, and value systems as a way of life (Christiaan et al., 2024; Hase, 2024). This transcends the religious sphere into the social realm which justifies sociological interrogation of the death of Jesus Christ and the implications on the global Christian community.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ provides the critical pillar upon which the Christian faith has anchorage in God's promise of redemption (Shaw & Habermas, 2016). This has the subsequent effect of influencing how Christians undertake their social life anchored in pursuit of Biblical teachings. It is also pivotal to Christian religious and historical context, which transcends far beyond the theological discourse. Crucifixion was an extremely painful form of capital punishment for offenders that posed a threat to Roman rule while other forms of capital punishment were used for other offenses during the Roman empire era (Bond, 2024).

It is on this basis that this study seeks to examine why was Christ crucified and what threat he posed politically to the Roman empire's imperial rule in Palestine instead of punishment through gladiatorial arena and spectacle. One must be cognitive of the fact that gladiatorial events were a popular form of public entertainment in Rome during the crucifixion of Jesus Christ (Stilo, 2020). In these events, the combatants fought each other to death to the merriment of the masses. The people used as fodder for these events were slaves and prisoners of war. Crucifixion had the purpose of acting as a deterrent for potential rebels, dissidents, and religious offenders deemed as enemies of the Roman empire.

The exploration of why crucifixion was selected as a form of capital punishment for Jesus Christ develops into deeper question of the functions of both the Roman governor of Pontius Pilate and Jewish religious authorities in the trial of Jesus Christ, considering the clear rules that were in existence based on the Roman empire rule and the Torah prescribed different forms of punishment (Gers-Uphaus, 2020; Visi, 2023).

First, the Roman Empire had a well-established, clearly defined and strict penal system which prescribed various punishments for people found guilty of criminal charges deemed not a threat to the State, while death via gladiatorial events were never a punishment for villainous acts but just a form of entertainment for the masses. Secondly, crucifixion was a preserve for those deemed as rebels and who were challenging the Roman political authority in Rome or in its conquered lands (Dunkle, 2013). Contrary to this Roman legal position in prescribing the death penalty, the Jewish religious leaders did not perceive Jesus Christ as a political threat but a religious heretic who was undermining the stability of their Jewish religious doctrines and practices (Carter, 2010; M. J. Cook, 2010). However, the Jewish religious leaders, the Rabbis, lacked the authority to implement a death penalty, incapacitating them from executing Jesus Christ which compelled them to seek the Roman rulers to implement the death penalty as capital punishment for Jesus Christ (Norman, 2007).

When looking at why Jesus Christ was a threat to the Jewish religious order, Norman (2007) states that faith is not a subject of importance to the Jewish conceptualization of the Messiah ben David because the conditions that one must fulfill are empirical and observable in a person or otherwise that person does not qualify to be Messiah. On the other side, Christianity strongly argues that it is by faith that Jesus Christ is the “Messiah,” while Jewish scholars argue that Jesus Christ as depicted in the Bible does not fulfill the Jewish conditions of being the Messiah ben David. The six conditions laid out for the Messiah are non-existent in Jesus and therefore the “Christian concept of faith in Jesus is therefore a substitute to this defect” (Norman, 2007). When one looks at this from the Jewish point of view, it becomes easy to discern why the Jewish religious authorities held Jesus Christ in contempt for threatening their religious practices and belief systems.

Having looked at the genesis of why the Jewish religious authorities appealed to their Roman rulers for the death sentence on Jesus Christ, one must also consider the complex sociopolitical environment of that time. This was an era where the religious leaders of the Jewish religion agitated for the death sentence on Jesus Christ for the accusation of blasphemy (Ferreira, 2025). On the other side, the Romans perceived Jesus as a potential political dissent who was very capable of instigating an uprising against the Roman rule in Judea (*Ibid*), it is therefore justifiable to conclude that the appropriate punishment for Jesus Christ was the death sentence in the eyes of the Roman laws of that time to discourage dissent or rebellion. It is in this context that one must be privy to the fact that gladiatorial events, despite their high popularity among the Romans, was not their chosen method of eliminating persons they deemed as political threats, which also raises a serious question on why Jesus Christ was crucified, and yet, by Roman traditions, he was a subject for the gladiatorial events as a form of death penalty (Dunkle, 2013; Sheppard, 2019). Secondly, the gladiatorial events served to reinforce the “legitimacy of local political, religious, and cultural institutions while underscoring existing social hierarchies and power relations within the unified community [of Rome]” (Sheppard, 2019). It is from this perspective that there were no gladiatorial events staged in Palestine and no record proves otherwise during the time of Christ nor any account of the same given in the Bible. This left crucifixion as the only means of executing Jesus Christ.

According to Whitaker (2017), the spectacles of death by crucifixion (θεωρία) would be meaningless without the presence of a public to witness these gruesome events, including the gladiatorial events. The following excerpt gives an account of spectacles of death in the Roman empire as follows.

“It is from this that the crucifixion of Jesus Christ was... a public event

None of these spectacles of death would be spectacles (θεωρία) at all without a viewing public. To remind ourselves of the obvious, a spectacle requires spectators. Therefore, crucifixions were conducted on the most heavily used roads so that the greatest number of people could watch. Other condemned criminals were forced to fight in the arena or act out their deaths upon stage in front of thousands of spectators. Such public deaths were designed to deter certain behaviors, entertain the masses, and reinforce the values of the Roman Empire” (Whitaker, 2017).

Death whether by crucifixion or by gladiatorial events, were meant for the entertainment of the masses as well as a tool for reinforcing the Roman ideals on the public. They acted as strong deterrents to behaviors considered improper by the Roman laws and prevent uprising by being tools of control that instilled fear in people to toe the line and obey their Roman conquerors.

A. Statement of the Problem

The crucifixion of Jesus Christ was the cornerstone of the Christian faith, which raises a critical question that this study seeks to explore. Why the crucifixion of Christ and not his subjection to death sentence via gladiatorial games needs an answer. This is in view of the elaborate methodologies of capital punishment that were in place during the Roman era at the time when Christ was alive, each method for a particular offence. Secondly, the gladiatorial events were a common feature in Rome and Pompeii and other regions of the empire. The focus of this critical analysis study is to develop a better understanding of the legal, sociopolitical and religious groundings for the death sentence of Christ via crucifixion and not any other method like gladiatorial events. There is need to explore whether it was the choice method the Roman conquerors used to exert political control through fear and intimidation or was it capturing the perspectives of the Jewish Rabbis as authorities of the Jewish religion threatened by the emergence of Jesus Christ in Palestine? The objective of this study was to explore the nexus of the Roman laws with the Jewish religious authorities defining the sociopolitical motives that influenced the choice of crucifixion as a form of punishment for the elimination of Jesus Christ

B. Justification for the Study

This study set out to explore the dynamics that shaped the execution of Jesus Christ through crucifixion and not gladiatorial games. The complexities of these dynamics are within the sociopolitical environment that is was constituted by the intersection of Jewish traditions, Roman imperial law as applied on the conquered territories, and the Jewish religion. Consequently, this study explored the reason as to why crucifixion was used in executing Jesus Christ and not subjecting him to gladiatorial games to face his death sentence. The Roman perception of gladiatorial events was meant to be consumed for public entertainment and enjoyment, while crucifixion was left for criminals, and people who were a threat, or perceived as having the potential to threaten Roman rule in the conquered lands or to as a threat to the Emperor. The outcome of this critical analysis cements the historical, sociological, and theological dialogues by projecting how political power was imbued by Roman traditions that defined punishment, which is crucial in understanding the factors that were at play that led to the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, within the context of the wider frameworks of Roman imperial rule, Roman traditions and the Jewish religious doctrines

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

This study used the Conflict Theory (CT) that was developed by Karl Marx which holds power struggles and social inequalities are the key drivers of conflict in the society (Obwonyo, 2019). The theory posits that the maintenance of social order in the society is through the domination of those in power over their subjects, and not through the exercise of consensus among the populace with the political elites. Secondly, the theory provides a platform for interrogating why the Romans and Jewish Rabbis sought to use their political and religious powers respectively to maintain the status quo threatened by the emergence of Jesus Christ, because he challenged the doctrines and practices of the Jewish religion, and a potential figure that could ignite dissidence against Roman occupation. The teachings of Christ threatened the existing Jewish religious foundations to the core, and the political arrangement of subservience to Roma rule and its political structures (Dewey, 2016).

The Jewish religious leaders did not have the power to proclaim a person guilty warranting a death sentence, they simply had no such authority and therefore they had to appeal to the Roman rulers to pronounce Jesus as guilty of seditious charges to secure his crucifixion by the Romans. The Jewish Rabbis perceived Jesus as a heretic who was out to challenge their religious authority and reshape power relations within the Jewish society through his teachings. The Roman laws did not give the Sanhedrin any powers determine a person was guilty of capital offense warranting a death sentence neither did it sanction them to prosecute a death sentence. With that shortcoming, the Rabbis appealed to the Roman governor of Judea Pontius Pilate to pronounce Jesus as guilty

for calling himself “King of the Jews” which was a seditious charge. This presented an opportunity for Pontius Pilate to pronounce Jesus guilty for being a threat to Roman political power in Judea.

The use of the conflict theory in guiding this study provided the appropriate theoretical framework in understanding how Roman and Jewish elites sought to maintain the status quo so that the idea of challenging their power dominance did not arise. Jesus Christ presented a religious challenge to the Rabbis religious power within the Jewish society while at the same time he was a potential threat to the Roman imperial rule. Therefore, allegations levelled against him denote a potential of having the masses rise against the established order within the Jewish religious system of that time. This also lent credit to the fact that the perception of Jesus as a figure capable of making the masses rebel against the Roman conquest of the Jews. It is from this dimension that the crucifixion was chosen as the ideal method of intimidating the public to obedience of established religious and political structures that were in existence as at that time in suppressing political and religious unrest in Palestine and in other areas of the Roman empire. In understanding the various conflicts merging into the crucifixion of Jesus, this theory provides a good framework for understanding the intersection of the factors of Roman imperial laws, Jewish religious power vested in the Rabbis, and the political power dynamics of the Roman empire and Jewish society that converged at the execution of Jesus Christ.

The Conflict Theory was suitable in guiding the study because it facilitated identification of institutional factors that constructed the intersection between Roman political power of the Jewish religious elites, in which the balance of power favoring the status quo was in opposition to the new religious doctrines advocated by Jesus Christ, perceived as having the potential to subvert Roman rule as well as undermine the Jewish religion. This is the nexus of the conflict that resulted in the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. In this way, the execution of Jesus Christ was the terminal end of avoiding conflict within the society by resorting to the traditional established principles that neither were a threat to Roman imperial rule nor to the Jewish religion.

METHODOLOGY

This study used qualitative research design in examining the three factors of the historical, political and religious context that defined the crucifixion of Jesus Christ in Palestine. The design was appropriate for the study because it provided a means of undertaking a qualitative analysis in the developing in-depth understanding of the power dynamics inherent in Palestine during the time when Jesus was alive and his eventual crucifixion, the legal practices and traditions of that time, and the religious context of authority in Jewish nation of the 1st century during the birth of Christianity. Data collection was exclusively from secondary sources from the internet that are scholarly in nature, which was inclusive of, but not limited to peer-reviewed journal articles, theological texts, and commentaries of a historical nature accessed via academic/scholarly platforms. These documents and sources of information were critical in providing information that help construct a good understanding of the Roman penal systems and the existing Jewish religious structures that converged to eliminate Jesus Christ’s threat to the society during the 1st century era in Palestine.

This study used critical analysis on the secondary documents and information obtained from internet-based sources. The critical analysis focused on authorial perspective, context of the historical framing of the information and the emergent theological interpretations. The analysis of the data used thematic analysis to analyze the data and the emergent patterns categorized into key themes constituting the main findings of the study. The analysis of the data was framed within the structure of the conflict theory which offered a prism for examining and interpreting the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, based on the manipulation of institutional powers, that were intended to maintain the status quo and existing social order in mitigating and/or neutralizing the perceived threats that Jesus Christ portended to both the Roman imperial rule and to the Jewish religious elites of that time.

Findings of the Study

The crucifixion of Jesus Christ was due to his ideas and teachings that challenged the then prevailing Jewish religious thoughts of that time. Secondly, there is a need to understand why his execution was not via gladiatorial games but through crucifixion in the context of the Jewish religion and the prevailing Roman thinking about the

concept of death through crucifixion and gladiatorial games. That episode in which the death sentence was implemented via crucifixion is a key reference point in the entire history of Christianity as a religion (Hilton, 2019). The development of the Christian faith as enshrined in its belief systems would not have been possible without the event of crucifixion, the death of Jesus Christ.

Christians are having a universal belief that Jesus Christ is the chosen Messiah and He is the one who brings redemption to humankind, however, this position is highly reviled and opposed in the Jewish traditions and religious thoughts that are irreconcilable to the conceptualization of Jesus Christ as “Messiah ben David” (Armstrong, 2025). Contemporary Christian thoughts are inclined to the position that Jesus is the champion of Christian faith, who was a law-abiding individual living in ancient Palestine undertaking the Christian missionary work when he was betrayed and Jewish contemporaries and crucified by the Romans (Campbell, 2024; Lee, 2023; Levy, 2025). There is undeniable proof that Jesus Christ was born and lived on earth (Merz, 2012; Shulam, 2025), and was crucified from confirmed historical sources that are independent of the Bible (Goldberg, 1995; Harmon, 2024; Tacitus, 2008). This sources of information about the life and crucifixion of Jesus Christ provides important evidence that he actually existed other than from the biblical accounts of the bible.

The choice of execution of the death citizen portrayed the crime to which one was accused of when Roman legal and sociopolitical traditions of the 1st century are critically examined This critical analysis of secondary data relating to the death sentence of Jesus Christ tries to unravel why Jesus was not subjected to the gladiatorial events, a public spectacle of that time, but was executed via crucifixion. This study focused on exploring historical accounts of a scholarly nature and archaeological findings to provide a confirmation of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ with the underlying reasons established for the choice of crucifixion over any other method of execution by the Roman soldiers.

A. Roman Imperial Laws and the Execution of Convicts

The Roman Empire had well established guidelines in place for the implementation of the various forms of capital punishment for offenders which were dependent on the charges that led to conviction, and each mode of executing the death sentence had a specific purpose it served (Michaels, 1990; Welch, 2022). Crucifixion was a sanction reserved for the, rebels, dissidents and persons who posed a threat to the Roman imperial rule (Schwartz, 1992; Springer, 2025), also was for the lowest criminals, but has a special reference for treason and seditious charges if one was found guilty of these crimes (J. G. Cook, 2011). Contrary to crucifixion, the gladiatorial events (which were known as *munera*), were ideally a spectacle meant for public entertainment rather than legal sentence for crimes committed against the State. Furtherance to that, gladiators were either enslaved people, prisoners of war or those unfortunate people deprived of their freedom, forced to train and fight to death in the public arena for purposes of entertaining the masses.

B. The Legal Status of Jesus Christ and Charges Preferred against Him

Looking at the context of Jesus Christ, it was clear he neither was a prisoner of war nor an enslaved person at the time he was facing the death sentence. According to the Bible and Christian oral traditions, he was a religious teacher who was out spreading the Gospel. However, Jewish religious authorities had him arrested and brought to Pontius Pilate who was governor of Judea in whose authority the governorship fell, and accused of blasphemy (a religious crime) and on claims that he was “King of the Jews” (which constituted a capital crime of a political nature).

The Jewish authorities did not have the mandate to proclaim a person guilty of capital offense under Roman rule neither did they have the powers to execute persons, which are factors that compelled them to seek Pontius Pilate to legitimize the death of Jesus Christ through public execution. Considering the charges preferred against Jesus the death sentence was the appropriate one in line with Roman rules. A person who claimed to be “King of the Jews” was subverting the powers of the Roman emperor which was a seditious offense, since the Jews were subjects of the Roman emperor. Furthermore, by claiming he was the Son of God, he was committing a crime of blaspheming God, in which the Jewish religious authorities could justify the execution of Jesus in preserving the Jewish religion from the “impurities” that Jesus preached.

C. The Objective of Crucifixion in Ancient Roman Empire

Crucifixion was a form of capital punishment used in the Roman empire to deter the conquered people under Roman rule from rebelling against their imperial rule. Crucifixion was a slow, painful, and agonizing way of executing convicted persons. In addition to that, it was intended to be an act of humiliation for the person being executed and was a terrifying warning for anyone who may have harbored the thought ,or wanted to rebel, or defy Roman authority (Georgia, 2013; Newall, 2022). Approximately 30 to 40 years after the crucifixion of Jesus, the Roman historian Tacitus provides a vivid account of the executions of many Jews during the siege of Jerusalem, in the year 70 CE (Tacitus, 2008)). Tacitus clearly documents the brutality of crucifixion and the desire to instill fear amongst the Jews in order to suppress further resistance from them. Despite this time gap from the crucifixion of Jesus to the siege of Jerusalem, this description as given by Tacitus reconciles with the Biblical narrative that projected the crucifixion of Jesus Christ as a public spectacle intended communicate the catastrophic outcomes of challenging Roman political authority and power.

D. Gladiatorial Fights as Forms of Public Entertainment

The gladiatorial events were construed by the ancient Romans as public forms of entertainment than tools of imposing the death sentence to political crimes that intended to subvert the authority of the Roman Emperor over conquered subjects. The gladiatorial events were public forms of entertainment in the ancient Roman empire relished by the Roman citizens. The *bestiarrius* (gladiator), was a person who was a prisoner of war or a slave, forced to fight in the public arena. The issue of gladiators as construed by the ancient Roman citizens were persons who fought in the public arena, usually to death, for the amusement of the masses, because they were slaves and prisoners of war with no rights and could fight for the sole purpose of entertaining the multitudes of Roman citizens in public gatherings.

The wealthy and political elites were usually the ones who financed and organized the gladiatorial events, or sometimes even the State, with the clear objective of displaying bravery, fighting acumen and tactical skills of the combatants in the arena. Taken in this context, they were never meant to act as a sanction in punishing people for political crimes or religious dissent. It is from this dimension that the issue of executing the death sentence from gladiatorial events would not have been in accordance with the Roman laws and regulations relating to the implementing of the capital punishment for political crimes against their imperial rule. This explains why Jesus Christ not subject to gladiatorial events, and instead, crucified because of the political implication of calling himself “King of the Jews.” The nature of the offense as Jesus Christ was charged suited crucifixion as a form of punishment, and further considering he was neither a slave nor a prisoner of war, he was therefore ineligible to be considered for gladiatorial sports because the nature of his offense called for crucifixion as a form of punishment.

E. Archaeological Evidence in Supporting the Nature and Reasons for Crucifixion

Archeological findings have also played a big role in collaborating the historical records as given in the Bible and the account given by Tacitus and other contemporaries of that era on crucifixion as a form of execution. The crucifixion of Jesus Christ with thieves as documented in the Bible as a way of shaming him publicly, is collaborated by the proposition of George (2013) and Newall (2022) on the purpose of the crucifixion and gladiatorial sports in the Roman empire. From archaeology, the discovery of the 2nd century graffiti that shows a man worshipping a crucified figure demonstrates the disdain directed towards Christians in the Roman empire by the Roman citizens. This depiction lends credit to the claims that Jesus Christ, when crucified on the cross as alleged in the Bible, was a way of subjecting him to ridicule and public shaming. This graffiti, known as the *ALexamenos graffito*, captures the prevailing attitudes in that era of Christians in the way they were perceived by the Roman people through the inscription “Alexamenos worships his god” on this ancient graffiti (Fowler, 2017; Nongbri, 2018). This graffiti provides clear evidence of the stigma that was related to the issue of crucifixion in which it became a symbol of the Christian faith for early Christians by the first three centuries of the existence of the Christian religion.

In a nutshell, the execution of Jesus Christ through crucifixion was in tandem with the Roman legal practices of subjecting convicts guilty of posing a threat to the Roman imperial rule, or being rebellious to Roman political authority, attracted the death penalty via crucifixion. Crucifixion was ignominious and a shame to the individual crucified. It was a method of execution with the underlying intention of sending a chilling warning to potential political dissidents. It resulted in executing people who stood accused of committing grave political and religious crimes and the conviction of Jesus was based on several grounds. The first one was based on being blasphemous to the Jewish religion as charged by the Rabbis and accused of claiming to be “King of Jews” which posed a latent threat to the Roman political power elites in Judea, and so it was realistic to perceive that as a threat to the Roman Emperor’s authority.

Historical accounts of gladiatorial events were a form of public entertainment and amusement rather than as a legal sanction for any crime. These sports had purely no connection to the legal outcomes of punishment for any wrong-doing. There is a clear demarcation of the purpose of gladiatorial games and crucifixion served in the Roman empire. With these factors kept in mind, the legal practices and norms of the time that required convicted criminals and treasonous persons face the death sentence justifies Jesus Christ execution via crucifixion to maintain the status quo of the Roman imperial rule in the conquered lands, and deter dissidence. This explains why Jesus was not a subject to the gladiatorial games as a punishment because it would not have been justifiable to throw a potential rebel and a person who threatened the Jewish religious order, as accused by the Rabbis, to the public arena in a gladiatorial fight to death. It would have served no purpose as a warning to others but would have been a source of entertainment for the publics.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Without the crucifixion and eventual resurrection of Jesus Christ as claimed in the Bible, the Christian religion would lack a foundation that is critical to its establishment, that Jesus Christ died to redeem mankind, after his resurrection three days after he died on the cross. Crucifixion has a significant role in the establishment of the Christian dogma and faith, which has finally shaped Christianity to be what it is as a religion in the contemporary world. The crucifixion of Jesus Christ is a central feature in the Christian religious narratives which has influenced Christian thoughts as well the development of sociopolitical and cultural structures for the contemporary global society.

Historical and archaeological evidence clearly document crucifixion as a method of executing offenders deemed as a threat to the Roman imperial rule or were rebellious to Roman authority in the conquered lands like the siege of Jerusalem in 70 CE (Tacitus, 2008). It was a method of punishing people guilty of sedition and/or treason. Roman penal laws and traditions of that time spelt out crucifixion as means of conveying a message of fear, through brutality, to act as deterrence against an uprising towards Roman imperial rule. This discussion puts the context of crucifixion to the 1st century Roman rule in Judea to the crucifixion of Jesus Christ of Nazareth. The aim is to clearly elucidate the sociopolitical environment under which crucifixion and gladiatorial games, brutal forms of punishment and entertainment by modern standards, were held. This aids in developing a clear picture in understanding why crucifixion was the preferred legal choice of executing Jesus Christ and not gladiatorial games of that era based on the religious and political considerations.

A. Roman Legal Framework and Execution Methods

The Roman Empire utilized different forms of capital punishment, each with its own distinct purpose. Crucifixion, one of the most brutal and humiliating forms of execution, was primarily reserved for slaves, rebels, and the lowest criminals, and those accused of treason or insurrection. This explains the crucifixion of Jesus Christ on the cross alongside thieves, based on the fact that Barnabas was a criminal who was destined to be crucified but the Jewish Rabbis elected to have him freed at the expense of Jesus, and they crucified Jesus alongside common thieves (Matthew 27:38). Crucifixion was not only a method of execution but also a tool for public deterrence. In contrast, gladiatorial combat, or *munera*, was considered a form of public spectacle for entertaining the masses of the Roman citizens rather than a legally sanctioned form of punishment.

Many historians of the Roman empire and its traditions and practices concur that the primary aim of crucifixion in the sociopolitical context of that 1st century CE era was to act as a warning and public deterrent to anyone who rebelled or was contemplating rebelling against the Roman imperial rule. Crucifixion was calculated to be a slow and painful process of dying that could stretch to several hours or even days based on the will of the executioner (Potter, 2012). The intent of crucifixion was to deliver a chilling grim message to the public, particularly in the conquered lands, who faced their execution in areas of high public visibility such as beside busy highways, near the entrances to cities, or public squares to maximize on the highest number of people who could view and be witnesses to the spectacle of crucifixion, in so doing, the Romans aimed at maximizing fear in their subjects in subduing them to obedience and conform to the Roman rulership. Gladiators, technically, did not need the use of convicted political prisoners or religious-related offenders. Gladiators were mere objects of entertainment who did not deserve to face crucifixion. Objects of entertainment were not criminals from the legal sense of the ancient Romans. They were just unfortunate to be prisoners of war or slaves, who were under their owners' whims to fight in arenas meant for public enjoyment of the Roman citizens, devoid of any underlying political messaging for the citizens of the Roman empire.

North (2000) examined the Roman law in relation to the gladiatorial games and concluded that they were ideally meant to enjoy the spectacle of fighting skills in combat of the fighters, a test of their endurance and resilience in fighting and overcoming their opponents. This study shows that gladiatorial games were extant of any political intentions or mechanizations, neither was it a tool for religious repression nor a tool for squashing political dissent or instilling fear in the populace. The gladiators were slaves and prisoners of war who trained to fight in pairs or even groups usually to the ultimate death, with the underlying intention being for enjoyment, amusement and merry of the masses. There were clearly not tools or sanctions in their use as deterrents to potential rebellions to the State or punishing persons found guilty of grave religious crimes, sedition or/and treason. It is here that the way the ancient Romans conceptualized the gladiatorial games or events as different from crucifixion. Gladiatorial games were a cherished sport events in which the masses indulged in it as spectators for their own enjoyment, while crucifixion was a tool used by the State to punish political dissidents and in quash political insurgents like in the siege of Jerusalem in 70 CE, rebels and other people who threatened the power of the State and the Roman Emperor (Boatwright, 2014).

It is now evident that the Romans did use crucifixion as a form of capital punishment for those people considered a threat, a danger, to the stability of the empire or to its political domination of power in the conquered lands like in Judea, where Jesus Christ was a subject of the Roman emperor. There no way that crucifixion was construed as a form of entertainment by the ancient Romans which meant that Jesus was not eligible to be executed using gladiatorial games as punishment for the capital offenses he was accused of (North, 2000). Gladiators on the other side, trained to fight for purposes of providing entertainment for the enjoyment of Roman citizens, and they usually fought to the hilt of death without any recourse to the idea or concept of using these fights as a form of punishment, a distinction amplified by many historians

B. Jesus' Status and Charges

The reason for execution of Jesus Christ through crucifixion was based on his legal status because he was neither a prisoner of war nor a slave, the two key critical categories that factored significantly in compelling a person to fight in a gladiator arena. Therefore, by the Roman laws, he was not a candidate for fighting in gladiatorial games. A closer examination of Christian teachings and Biblical scriptures shows that Jesus Christ was a religious teacher and leader, who had committed a capital crime of claiming divine authority and was a heretic in the eyes of Jewish religious Rabbis. His claim of divine authority challenged the prevailing religious order of the Jewish people as at that time, which resulted in Jesus Christ coming into conflict with Jewish religious leaders. His claims did not only bring him to conflict with the prevailing religious order, it also resulted in seditious charges leveled against him because his claim as "King of the Jews," identified him as a threat to the established Roman imperial rule and political control of that time.

Historical accounts from Bible demonstrate that Jesus Christ, as charged for sedition by the Roman governor of Judea, Pontius Pilate, was for the political crime of claiming to be "King of the Jews" which was punishable by crucifixion based on the Roman laws and in the interest of the Roman political authorities in Judea. It did not

matter whether that claim was symbolic or literal in that sense, but it was proof for a conviction that Jesus Christ was threatening the sacred sovereignty of the Caesar, the Roman emperor. On the other side, while this was not a deep issue of concern for the Jewish religious leaders, their focus on the fact that he was disrupting the prevailing order of the Jewish religion, and its principal tenets, with his teachings and claims that amounted to blasphemy, a serious crime in the perspective of the Jewish religious laws and traditions.

The Jewish Council that was handling his case did not have authority to implement a death sentence on anyone under the Roman laws of that time. Therefore, the religious leaders at this council sought audience with Pontius Pilate to secure the execution of Jesus Christ. The account of seeking Pontius Pilate's intervention to pronounce Jesus guilty and therefore eligible for execution through crucifixion is corroborated by the conclusions of North (2000) about Roman laws and procedures of implementing the death sentence through crucifixion. The Jewish leaders who constituted the Sanhedrin had no powers to execute anyone, it was a preserve for the Roman governor to pronounce a person guilty of such capital offenses and implement the death sentence through crucifixion. Pontius Pilate, being the Roman governor of Judea, proclaimed Jesus guilty but not of religious offenses but preferred the charge of sedition, because of his claim that he was "King of the Jews" (Matthew 27:29, New International Version), which may be an attempt to usurp the powers of the Roman Emperor, yet, Jesus was his subject meaning his crime was punishable by death, which was favorable to the Jews because it sort to eliminate his threats to the Jewish religious order (Younis, 2023).

James Dunn takes a strong position that the execution of Jesus Christ was a political as well as a religious function in the context of punishing Jesus Christ for his infractions to the Jewish religion and the political supremacy of the Romans (Dunn, 2003). By Jesus Christ proclaiming himself to be the "King of the Jews," he had threatened to infringe on the Roman imperial rule which was a seditious act punishable by death because it had the possibility of leading into an insurrection from the subjugated subjects of Roman rule in Judea. This is the basis upon which Pontius Pilate relied to deliver the death sentence on Jesus Christ which would lead to his eventual crucifixion. In essence, it was an affirmation that Jesus Christ was a potential threat to the established Roman imperial rule over Judea, and the decision was never based on religious infractions against the gods that the Romans worshipped. Furthermore, Jesus was neither a slave nor a prisoner of war who would have been subject to gladiatorial games as a fighter for purposes of entertaining the masses. Therefore, execution by crucifixion was the appropriate way of handing him the death sentence under the Roman laws of that time.

C. Purpose of Crucifixion

The death sentence implementation via crucifixion was a preserve for people found guilty of criminal offenses, but was also the preferred choice of instance for rebels, political dissidents or any that were a threat to Roman imperial rule, whether the threat was real or perceived.

The Roman conquerors used crucifixion to ensure that the persons they accused of sedition or rebellion met a painful slow death in public view, as a statement that demonstrated the might of the Romans, who would squash rebellion, dissident and disobedience to their rule with brutality. It was way of sending a message meant to instill fear in their conquered subjects. This was meant to ensure that nobody dared to rise and challenge their imperial authority. Proof of the use of crucifixion to quell uprisings are found in the writings of Tacitus relating to the siege of Jerusalem during in 70 CE, who vividly explains how crucifixion was used a tool to quell uprisings from Jewish dissents with the aim of acting as a public deterrent to solidify the Roman grip on power (Tacitus, 2008).

The Biblical writings offer a similar account in which the crucifixion of Jesus was done publicly to humiliate him, which was a well-documented public spectacle in the Bible that resonates well with the writings of Tacitus as to why crucifixion was a tool for the execution of political dissents by the Roman authorities. Pontius Pilate's handing Jesus the death sentence via crucifixion was sending a clear message to others. Jesus was an example to illustrate the catastrophic fate awaiting anyone who even purported to challenge the Roman political authority in Judea. The apparent humiliation, and the intense physical agony and suffering that Jesus Christ underwent on the cross, justified the Roman use of crucifixion in punishing Jesus Christ for his seditious offence. By claiming to be the "King of the Jews" regardless of whether it was figurative or not, satiated the condition of Jesus Christ as a political insurgent in the eyes of the Roman governor of Judea. It is therefore conclusive to assert that

crucifixion was not a spectacle for public entertainment of the masses like in the gladiatorial events, but they planned and carefully executed in public as a warning to the subjects of Roman rule in quelling any rebellion or ensuring any further dissent is eliminated in totality through fear-mongering in the act of crucifixion (Koester, 2000).

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that execution of Jesus Christ via crucifixion was the only legal way in which he could face his death sentence based on the Roman penal code. The evidence adduced in this study takes cognition of the gravity of his crimes politically under Roman law as seditious by labeling himself as the “king of the Jews,” which figuratively meant that he was challenging the authority of the Roman Emperor in Palestine. This mere act constituted a capital crime of sedition which was punishable by death via crucifixion, which was the mode of executing people perceived as enemies of the Roman Empire. Runaway slaves, murderers, rebels, and people who blasphemed the gods were punished by the same method, crucifixion.

Any threat that was endangering the authority of Caesar was quelled in a manner that sent a chilling warning in terms of gruesome death to others not to dare, and crucifixion was the perfect choice. It was to act as psychological barriers to any attempt to rebel or cause an uprising against the Caesar. This historical fact coincides with the Biblical account of why Pilate sentenced Jesus to death on account of a seditious charge, even though flimsy, to the cross for crucifixion as a death penalty. Further, the possibilities that Pontius Pilate had no reason to condemn Jesus to death may have been the factor that made the Jewish religious leaders report on him for calling himself the “King of the Jews,” which now compelled Pontius Pilate to crucify Jesus Christ.

On the other side, death via gladiatorial games even though it was horrific by modern standards, was a public spectacle of entertainment for these ancient Romans. In addition, petty offenders were also subject to gladiatorial games. However, the main fodder of people who were the objects of fighting in these games were usually prisoners of war. Attention must be directed to the fact that petty criminals were not liable to the shaming that crucifixion awarded those executed in that method, because they posed no threat to the Emperor’s imperial authority.

Finally, Pontius Pilate made a smart political move by allowing the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. He was only interested in appeasing the Jewish religious leaders for the purpose of upholding imperial stability. This is because the potential for an uprising was real and the Jewish people wanted Jesus crucified to maintain the status quo with the old Jewish religious customs that Jesus threatened. It is on this grounds that Jesus was crucified to avert local uprisings. In the discovery of the Alexameno graffiti, it highlighted how the Roman society perceived with disdain the early Christians and the way they related the cross to the execution of Christians as a punishment, because Christians were considered a threat to Roman imperial authority, or could subvert Caesar’s power with their teachings.

In view of Roman practices of that time, the crucifixion of Jesus was not a religious matter, but one pegged on political reasons based on seditious charges. In view of the Conflict Theory, the crucifixion of Jesus eliminated conflict between Roman imperial rule and the Jewish people by safeguarding Roman interests as the masters, and the Jews as subjects. For the Jewish people, they perceived it as a means of regaining their status quo and maintaining the old religious systems that favored them as powerful people in the Jewish society. Finally, crucifixion was suitable for Jesus because of his political charge of sedition satisfied Roman legal position that allowed for capital punishment via crucifixion. Gladiatorial games were inapplicable to Jesus because his crime did not make him a petty offender, but a candidate for crucifixion as per the established Roman penal code.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study recommends that more interdisciplinary research studies undertaken, to develop a better in-depth understanding of the symbolic meanings underlying the execution of capital punishment in the context of political-religious offences that Jesus Christ faced. Secondly, there is need to do more research to locate more non-Biblical evidence of the existence of Jesus Christ because he has is a leading figure in shaping global socio-

cultural and political dynamics through His teachings. This is due to the fact there are historical written evidence of His existence on earth written by historical contemporaries of that era like Tacitus, the identification of more authentic records proving of His earthly existence. Finally, there is a need to develop a better understanding of what really constitutes Roman capital punishment in relation to crucifixion and gladiatorial spectacles

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