

Torture and the Bible

This Briefing comes at the time when Christians generally are celebrating Easter. The notion that Jesus was tortured, then executed in the manner commonly reserved for criminals and the lower orders, yet overcame death, is central to this story. One of the criminals crucified alongside Jesus is alleged to have said to the other, "We are receiving the due reward of our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong" By that standard, it wasn't the violence and cruelty of crucifixion that was wrong, it was simply the miscarriage of justice. Can we now accept such a world view?

In this Briefing we look at the violent world portrayed in the Bible – a world in which the powerful reigned by terror, and used torture for punishment – and seek to put the violence in which Christianity began (and too often continued) in context.

The Old Testament World

Even God seems to be part of this violent world. The God of the Old Testament creation myth punishes the serpent, Eve and Adam in ways we may now consider to be "cruel and degrading" (Genesis 3. 14 - 19). In Deuteronomy, God promises blessings in return for obedience, and horrific punishments for disobedience (Deuteronomy 28. 25 - 35).

There was abuse of trust, as in the story (Judges 16) of how Delilah beguiled Samson into revealing his vulnerabilities to her before betraying him to the Philistines.

Torture was not only normalised, but seen as part of the way rulers were expected to behave. In Proverbs 26 we read that "*A wise king winnows the wicked, and drives the wheel over them*", referring to the punishment of forcing the victim to lie on the ground and be driven over by chariots.

Isaiah refers to the Lord's plans to destroy Babylon: "*Behold, the day of the Lord comes, cruel, with wrath and fierce anger, to make the earth a desolation and to destroy its sinners from it*" (Isaiah 13. 90).

There are many more examples, reflecting a world in which torture was routine punishment, often followed by death as vengeance.

A shocking event

The crucifixion of Jesus would have seemed routine to the occupying powers, but shocking and intimidating to the ordinary people.

As the poet Steve Turner says in his poem "Christmas is really for the children", Easter
*has whips, blood, nails,
a spear and allegations
of body snatching.
It involves politics, God
and the sins of the world.
It is not good for people
of a nervous disposition.*

If this were happening today, a sympathetic reporter might write something like this:

News of forced arrest, beatings, torture and execution

We have limited information as everything happened in the dead of night, but we have received news that a popular public figure was taken by force at night by a mob and security guards to the power base of leading local officials. Following initial night-time interrogation by the high priest, the person was manhandled to the high-priest's close ally, the regional head of the occupying force, for sentencing. He was however then passed to the local king for further interrogation but was swiftly returned to the political governor.

Though no clear case against him was made he was led away to be mocked and beaten. Mob rule took over, a crowd incited by local leaders demanded death. Regional officials, after three attempts to release him, handed him over to the local military for execution.

After being forced to march across the city carrying the cross on which he was to be killed, while being all the time mocked by the crowd, he was taken outside the city walls to a known area for execution.

He was left to hang on a cruel system of execution developed by the military to exert fear on the community. People who he supported only days or weeks before came to mock him in his final moments of life.

Observers of the events have commented that while the occupying powers feared that he might be the focal point for a local uprising, the religious leaders (whose status was dependent on the permission of the occupying power) feared that he might be a threat to the temple's source of income because of his public condemnation of some of their practices.

Finally, he died and due to local customs was placed in a tomb but no time was left to complete normal burial rituals. A giant rock was placed against the tomb and guards left on duty in case followers tried to remove the body and claim some type of miracle from this terrible execution.



Image: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/paullew/16976258845>

An Opportunity?

Unlike the events referred to on the first page of this briefing, the story of the crucifixion and what happened immediately afterward seems to carry no implication that it was part of how God intended the world to be – on the contrary, it was meant to be the opportunity for a new beginning. But that wasn't quite what happened.

After the crucifixion

Torture continued, and continues. There are many examples in the New Testament of followers suffering torture, and even glorying in their own steadfastness under such duress.

Paul and Silas, travelling in the ministry some time after the crucifixion, were beaten and cast into jail. They did not flee, even though they could have done so, but used the opportunity to preach the new faith (Acts 16. 16-34). Paul, in his letter to the Hebrews, reminds them, in chapter 11, of some of the truly horrific tortures suffered in the past by the faithful, and seems to downplay such suffering, "for here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city which is to come". Revelation 9 refers to torture, not followed by death, but making the victims wish for death. Locusts were allowed "to torture for five months [those who did not have the mark of God on their foreheads] until "men will seek death and will not find it" (Revelation 9 4-6).

Long after biblical times torture was practised in the name of Christianity. The examples throughout history are too many, and too well known, to be repeated here. And torture still continues around the world, despite being illegal.

How do we respond today?

At Easter time we remember Jesus. For some these events are as real as if they had happened yesterday. To others it is a symbolic death of a good man who tried to help the world. Whatever we believe, it is a shocking story of corruption, illegal and secret trials and torture.

To many, the rolling-back of the rock shone Light into the world and gave the hope of redemption and resurrection. We need this Light to enable us to look into dark places and help those subject to torture and execution. May we help bring Light to the many victims without justice.

In Q-CAT we remember many who go through such terrible steps of aggressive arrest, mock trial, beatings, torture, and execution. For many families the body has never been found, never put to rest. The loss is made worse as the authorities do not even view that these individuals existed, it is only the parents and family who can love and mourn their loved ones.

Many organisations and individuals campaign against torture. In Q-CAT we also recognise what torture does to the perpetrators, and indeed to us all. We refuse to accept torture and inhuman treatment as simply part of political reality. We recall the cynical collusion between Herod and Pilate – it has a disturbingly modern ring to it. We have work to do.

Having read this Briefing, you might like to use it as the basis for a meditation:

- *Think about how you might have behaved and felt if you had been a member of the crowd watching Jesus carry his cross up the hill / one of his cousins who had been following his activities over the previous few years / someone whom Jesus had helped.*
- *Think about how you might have behaved as an uninvolved citizen in Germany or Italy in the 1930s, or in Russia today.*
- *Maybe you would like to explore how it feels to be a different person from yourself with different values and reactions. It can be useful to try to stand shoulder to shoulder with them; seeing their perspective even though it may be radically different from your own.*

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