

**Is the cross a pagan symbol?**

Answers to Jehovah's Witnesses #13

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Alexamenos Graffito (2nd cent.), with the inscription, "Alexamenos worships God."

**Summary:** The Watchtower Society teaches that Jesus was not executed on a cross but rather on a simple upright stake or pole. Jehovah's Witnesses consider the cross a pagan symbol that was introduced into Christendom in its apostasy. However, the facts show that Jesus did indeed die on a cross and that the cross was used as a Christian symbol with no pagan meaning as early as the first century.

This article is one of a series of articles explaining in detail the doctrines of Jehovah's Witnesses and showing why those teachings are not in harmony with the facts and teachings of the Bible. For an overview, see our article on [what Jehovah's Witnesses believe](#).

### **What the Watchtower Teaches**

The Watchtower Society teaches that the cross is a pagan symbol and that its use in traditional Christian churches marks them as part of "apostate Christendom." The Society maintains that Jesus died on a simple upright stake and not on any type of cross. The form of the instrument of Christ's death is not in and of itself important, but the Watchtower treats the matter as of great importance because it claims that the cross was introduced into Christianity in order to make the Christian faith more palatable to pagans. The following statement from one of the Watchtower's recent, main doctrinal instruction books summarizes their position:

An important reason is that Jesus Christ did not die on a cross. The Greek word generally translated "cross" is *stau-ros*'. It basically means "an upright pale or stake." ... There is no evidence that for the first 300 years after Christ's death, those claiming to be Christians used the cross in worship. In the fourth century, however, pagan Emperor Constantine became a convert to apostate Christianity and promoted the cross as its symbol. Whatever Constantine's motives, the cross had nothing to do with Jesus Christ. The cross is, in fact, pagan in origin.... Why, then, was this pagan symbol promoted? Apparently, to make it easier for pagans to accept "Christianity."<sup>1</sup>

The Watchtower opposes not just the veneration or adoration of the cross, a practice common especially in Catholicism, but any use of the cross as a positive symbol or representation of the Christian faith. Jehovah's Witnesses are also taught that the practice of using the cross as a symbol of Christ is inherently offensive regardless of the form it took:

Who would think of kissing the revolver that had been used by a murderer to kill one's loved one? It is just as senseless to bestow affection on the instrument on which Jesus met a cruel death....<sup>2</sup>

In their New World Translation, the Society translates the Greek word *stauros* (which virtually all English versions render as "cross") as "torture stake."

### **The Watchtower's Misuse of Scholarship on the Cross**

The Watchtower Society has published many articles on the cross, citing a large number of secondary sources (especially lexical references and Christian dictionaries and encyclopedias) in seeming support of its claims regarding the nature of the cross. The main point the Society seeks to prove with these citations is that Jesus did not die on a cross (an instrument of execution using two beams of wood) but rather was executed on a single upright stake. We cannot review all of these secondary sources here. Almost all of the sources that the Watchtower cites state that the word *stauros* originally referred to a stake but by the first century commonly referred to the Roman instrument of execution, which typically

involved two beams joined in some form. Most of these sources go on to explain that Jesus died on a cross (specifically, an upright beam with a horizontal crossbeam). Thus, ***nearly all of the citations the Watchtower has used over many decades to support their claim actually contradict it.***

One example will have to suffice to illustrate the point. The Watchtower cites the entry on the cross in the second edition of the *New Bible Dictionary* as follows:

*Stau-ros'* in both the classical Greek and Koine carries no thought of a "cross" made of two timbers. It means only an upright stake, pale, pile, or pole, as might be used for a fence, stockade, or palisade. Says Douglas' *New Bible Dictionary* of 1985 under "Cross," page 253: "The Gk. word for 'cross' (*stauros*; verb *stauroo* . . . ) means primarily an upright stake or beam, and secondarily a stake used as an instrument for punishment and execution."<sup>3</sup>

What the Watchtower has done here is to quote selectively from the very beginning of the dictionary entry while ignoring the rest of what it says:

The Gk. word for 'cross' (*stauros*; verb *stauroō*; Lat. *crux*, *crucifigo*) means primarily an upright stake or beam, and secondarily a stake used as an instrument for punishment and execution. It is used in this latter sense in the NT.... Apart from the single upright post (*crux simplex*) on which the victim was tied or impaled, there were three types of cross. The *crux commissa* (St Anthony's cross) was shaped like a capital T, thought by some to be derived from the symbol of the god Tammuz, the letter *tau*; the *crux decussata* (St Andrew's cross was shaped like the letter X; the *crux immissa* was the familiar two beams †, held by tradition to be the shape of the cross on which our Lord died (Irenaeus, *Haer.* 2.24.4). This is strengthened by the references in the four Gospels (Mt. 27:37; Mk. 15:26; Lk. 23:38; Jn 19:19-22) to the title nailed to the cross of Christ over his head.<sup>4</sup>

According to the very source the Watchtower quoted, the "primary" meaning of the word *stauros* as "stake" was not its only usage. It came to be used for the wooden instrument of execution that could take various specific forms, including T, X, and †. The dictionary entry also offers evidence from the Gospels that Jesus was most likely executed on the last-mentioned type of cross.

A very small number of the sources that the Watchtower cites do support their contention that Jesus did not die on a cross. The most notable of these sources are E. W. Bullinger's *Lexicon* (1886) and Vine's *Dictionary* (1940).<sup>5</sup> Bullinger, though a competent scholar, was a controversial theologian who was rather notorious for his extremely idiosyncratic interpretations of the Bible on various issues and for his advocacy of several dubious claims (e.g., the gospel revealed in astrology, the flat-earth theory, and more). Vine was a Plymouth Brethren educator and writer with some academic training. The claims made by Bullinger and Vine have been thoroughly debunked by more recent historical and biblical scholarship pertinent to the cross. Unfortunately, up to now the Watchtower has simply ignored such scholarship and has continued to rely heavily on these few older works as well as numerous out-of-context quotations.

### **Current Scholarship on the Cross**

The "old" classic work of scholarship on the cross (though much more recent than almost all of the secondary sources the Watchtower cites on the subject) is a 1977 monograph by German scholar Martin Hengel. The Watchtower's writing department cannot claim to be innocently unaware of Hengel's work because they have cited it at least once.<sup>6</sup> If they actually read the book they became quite aware of the

abundant evidence known more than forty years ago confirming that Jesus was indeed executed on a cross.<sup>7</sup> In addition, a number of excellent academic works dealing with crucifixion have been published in the past ten years or so. There is essentially a consensus among contemporary scholars that the Romans used a variety of crosses in crucifixion and that Jesus was probably crucified either on a *crux commissa* (T) or a *crux immissa* (†).<sup>8</sup>

The main error underlying the position taken by Bullinger and Vine (and repeated by the Watchtower) is the root or etymological fallacy. This is the mistake (often found in popular “word studies” and still occasionally found in scholarly literature) of claiming that a word’s meaning is determined by or even limited to its word origin or root elements.<sup>9</sup> We encountered this fallacy in the Watchtower’s claim that there can be only one archangel because the root element *arch-* means “chief.”<sup>10</sup> Imagine someone two thousand years from now arguing that the English word *bar* originally denoted a pole or rod and therefore could not possibly have been used to refer to a place of business where alcoholic beverages were sold. That is the very sort of mistake made by those claiming that the word *stauros* originally meant a simple upright stake and therefore could not have referred to a more complex instrument of execution such as a cross.<sup>11</sup>

Multiple independent lines of evidence support the conclusion that Jesus died on some sort of cross (whether shaped like T or †).

### ***Testimonies from Early Christian Writings***

Several early Christian writings from the early second century and thereafter indicated that Jesus was executed on a cross. Contrary to the Watchtower’s claim that the cross was introduced into Christendom to accommodate pagans, one of the earliest written descriptions of Christ’s cross come from Justin Martyr, a Christian in the mid-second century who was beheaded for his faith. Justin actually gives an explicit description of the cross, which he said was formed by joining two beams of wood (*Dialogue with Trypho the Jew* 91.2).

An even earlier description comes from the Epistle of Barnabas. The Watchtower is aware of this evidence but dismisses it on the grounds that the epistle was not written by the apostle Barnabas. They conclude that it was “written after the cross had been adopted as a symbol of Christendom,”<sup>12</sup> which as we saw at the beginning of this article Jehovah’s Witnesses claim took place in the fourth century under the influence of the Roman emperor Constantine. However, although Barnabas was not the author, scholars date the epistle to the period AD 70-135, two centuries before Constantine.<sup>13</sup>

Another early allusion to the form of the cross comes from Ignatius of Antioch, a Christian bishop who wrote several epistles between about AD 105 and 115. True believers are “branches of the cross” bearing incorruptible fruit (Ignatius, *To the Trallians* 11.2). Here the “cross” is pictured as a tree with branches, apparently akin to the tree of life, though Ignatius uses the standard term “cross” and not the word “tree.” The metaphor alludes to the common form of the cross with an upright beam (the “trunk”) and a crossbeam (the “branches”).

### ***Literary Descriptions of Crucifixion***

Although ancient Greco-Roman writers generally refrained from describing crucifixion in detail, because it was a horrific and extremely shameful way to die, in various places they confirmed that it typically involved execution on a cross. We will mention just two examples here.

Plautus, in one of his Latin comedies (ca. 206-204 BC), engages in some dark humor by having the character of a slave in his story threatened with having his “hands spread out” with a “crossbar” (Latin, *patibulum*).<sup>14</sup> His writings contain many other references to crucifixion, all of which are consistent with the traditional understanding.<sup>15</sup>

Epictetus, a Stoic philosopher writing in the early second century AD, scornfully described a rich man who has gotten undressed and stretched himself out to be bathed by his servants “as those who have been crucified are pressed out on this side and on that” (*Discourses* 3.26.22).<sup>16</sup> This scandalous description reflects the fact that crucifixion victims were completely exposed and their arms typically stretched out on both sides.

### ***Pagan Graffiti and Other Graphic Representations***

A few graphic representations of crucifixion (produced by non-Christians) confirm the traditional understanding of crucifixion as involving the use of a crossbeam. These include a fresco in a tomb in Rome and a few instances of graffiti depicting crucified victims (most famously the Puteoli graffito).<sup>17</sup> One of these graffiti rather clearly refers specifically to the crucifixion of Jesus. In a notorious graffito discovered in 1857 on a wall near the Palatine Hill in Rome and dated ca. AD 200, a pagan ridiculed Christianity by depicting a Christian called Alexamenos worshiping his god (with the head of an ass) on a cross.<sup>18</sup>

This “Alexamenos graffito” is important for our subject in two ways. First, of course, it attests to the fact that in the second century as far away as Rome, Jesus was understood to have died on a cross. Second, it shows that the early Christians certainly would not have invented the notion of Jesus dying on a cross in order to make Christianity more palatable to pagans. On the contrary, pagans considered the Christians’ devotion to a crucified deity something to be ridiculed. The evidence of the graffito thus refutes the Watchtower’s claim that apostate Christians introduced the cross into their religion from paganism.

### ***The Remains of a Crucified Man***

Skeletal remains of a first-century crucified man named Yehohanan (John) were found in 1968 in a cemetery in Giv’at ha-Mivtar (in today’s east Jerusalem), including remnants of a nail still lodged in the right heel bone. The only controversy among archaeologists regarding this find was how Yehohanan’s extremities were affixed to the cross. The initial claims that his heels were nailed together by a single nail and that his wrists were nailed to the crossbeam<sup>19</sup> were later shown to be most likely incorrect; it seems his heels were nailed separately to either side of the upright beam and that his wrists or lower arms were tied to the crossbeam.<sup>20</sup> In any case, it was a cross—and in the same general area and time as Jesus’ execution.

### ***The Staurogram in Early New Testament Papyri***

Three New Testament papyri manuscripts from the period 175-225 abbreviate the word *stauros* (“cross”) using the staurogram—a symbol formed by combining the Greek letters *tau* (Τ) and *rho* (Ρ). The combination of the two letters (which scholars call a ligature) formed an image that served as a graphic representation of a person on a cross. For example, instead of writing **σταυρος** (*stauros*), the scribe in some places wrote **σϞος**.

Since the manuscripts were produced by different scribes probably independently of one another, they attest to a practice that must have predated them all. In turn, that practice attests to the fact that it was already established in Christians' minds in the early second century (if not earlier) that Jesus had been executed on a cross.<sup>21</sup>

### **Summary of the Evidence**

From these varied lines of evidence from geographically diverse locations<sup>22</sup> and coming from different types of sources (both literary and archaeological) we may confidently draw the following conclusions:

- (1) The Romans did indeed crucify people in the time of Jesus using crossbeams.
- (2) Both Christians and non-Christians from at least the early second century agreed that Jesus had been crucified in that manner.
- (3) Christians did not borrow the idea of a cross from paganism. Rather, it was a form of execution used by the pagan Romans. Christians would certainly not have invented the idea that Jesus was crucified.
- (4) Although the cross became a prominent, public symbol of Christianity after Constantine, its use as a Christian symbol goes back to within a century or so of the time of Christ.

### **Biblical Response**

The New Testament provides no direct description of the cross on which Jesus died. However, several details in the Gospel accounts of Jesus' execution confirm that he died on some sort of cross.

1. When Thomas heard from the other disciples that Jesus had risen from the dead, Thomas replied that he would not believe it unless he saw "in his hands the mark of the nails" (John 20:25). This comment indicates that (at least) two nails were used to affix Jesus' hands to the instrument of his execution. This fact almost certainly means that each of Jesus' two hands was nailed separately rather than being nailed together with one nail or spike (as depicted consistently in the artwork in Watchtower literature). By far the most plausible explanation for how this was done is that his hands were nailed to a crossbeam.
2. According to the Gospels, the Romans forced a man named Simon of Cyrene to carry Jesus' cross (*stauros*) for him to Golgotha (Matt. 27:32; Mark 15:21; Luke 23:26).<sup>23</sup> It is very unlikely that a criminal or any one man carried the upright poles to the place of execution. They would have been too heavy for the typical man to carry by himself, and they would then have to be planted firmly in the ground before the execution could take place. Hence, most scholars understand the word *stauros* in this context to refer specifically to the crossbeam, what was known in Latin as the *patibulum*.<sup>24</sup> Ironically, what this means is that the Watchtower is half-right: In at least some places in the New Testament, the word *stauros* does refer to a single pole or beam, but in these contexts it is referring to the crossbeam that was attached to the upright beam or post.
3. The placement of an inscription specifying the crime for which Jesus had been found guilty (known in Latin as the *titulus*) on the cross "over his head" (Matt. 27:37; Luke 23:38) provides some information of relevance. It rules out the so-called St. Andrew's Cross (shaped like the letter **X**) as the form of cross on which Jesus died. Many scholars think the *titulus* being placed above Jesus' head supports the conclusion that the cross was a *crux immissa* or four-armed cross (shaped like †). If the crossbeam or *patibulum* was above Jesus' head (with his arms

stretched diagonally away from his body), it might have been a *crux commissa* (shaped like the capital T). Had it been a simple upright beam with no crossbeam, Jesus' hands would have been impaled well above his head, making the upright pole very tall (and reducing further the likelihood of any one man carrying it out of the city). Moreover, one would have expected Matthew and Luke to say that the inscription was placed above Jesus' hands, if (as the Watchtower claims) Jesus' hands were nailed together directly over his head. Thus, the placement of the *titulus* above Jesus' head is another bit of evidence that Jesus was executed on a cross.

The Watchtower's argument that true Christians would not cherish the instrument of Christ's death regardless of its form misses an important element of New Testament teaching. Christians have no love for crucifixion itself, but they do love the Crucified One. We love, cherish, and honor Christ for his sacrificial act of submitting himself to crucifixion on our behalf.

The apostle Paul teaches us in his epistles that the cross of Christ is central to the Christian faith. Paul referred to his message as "the word of the cross" (1 Cor. 1:18) and could sum up his message in the two words "Christ crucified" (1 Cor. 1:23; 2:2). Christ's death and resurrection are the essential historical events confessed in the gospel (1 Cor. 15:3-4). Those who oppose the true Christian faith are "enemies of the cross of Christ" (Phil. 3:18). When true Christians are persecuted, it is not for their culturally idiosyncratic practices but "for the cross of Christ" (Gal. 6:12). Paul even taught us to boast or glory in the cross of Christ:

But far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world (Gal. 6:14 ESV).

Sadly, the Watchtower's polemic against the cross obscures the very heart of the gospel.

## NOTES

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[1.](#) "Why True Christians Do Not Use the Cross in Worship," in *What Does the Bible Really Teach?* (Watchtower, 2005), 204, 205. See also "Did Christ Die on a Cross?" *Watchtower* (March 15, 1957): 167.

[2.](#) *Ibid.*, 168.

[3.](#) "Impalement," in *Insight on the Scriptures* (Watchtower, 1988), 1:1191, ellipsis in original.

[4.](#) J. B. T., "Cross, Crucifixion," in *New Bible Dictionary*, ed. J. D. Douglas, 2nd ed. (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1982), 253 (253-54).

[5.](#) Ethelbert W. Bullinger, *A Critical Lexicon and Concordance to The English and Greek New Testament*, 2nd ed. (London: Longmans, Green, 1895 [1886]), 818-19; W. E. Vine, *A Comprehensive Dictionary of the Original Greek Words with their Precise Meanings for English Readers* (McLean, VA: MacDonald Publishing, reprint [1940]), 258-59. This work was later retitled and later still combined with a similar work on the Old Testament (which is generally more reliable than Vine's New Testament work). The combination work is known as *Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*,



ed. Merrill F. Unger and William White Jr., rev. ed. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1985; with Topical Index, 1996).

6. “Resist the Pressure of Public Opinion,” *Watchtower* (Aug. 15, 2010): 14.

7. Martin Hengel, *Crucifixion in the Ancient World and the Folly of the Message of the Cross* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977).

8. Most notably David W. Chapman, *Ancient Jewish and Christian Perceptions of Crucifixion*, WUNT 2/244 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2010); John Granger Cook, *Crucifixion in the Mediterranean World*, WUNT 327 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014); and David W. Chapman and Eckhard J. Schnabel, *The Trial and Crucifixion of Jesus: Texts and Commentary*, WUNT 344 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015); Bruce W. Longenecker, *The Cross before Constantine: The Early Life of a Christian Symbol* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015).

9. James Barr, *Semantics of Biblical Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961), 107–60; D. A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 28–33; Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, rev. and expanded ed. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006), 84–89.

10. See Robert M. Bowman Jr., “[Is Jesus Michael the Archangel?](#)” Answers to Jehovah’s Witnesses #7” (Cedar Springs, MI: Institute for Religious Research, 2018).

11. Cf. Chapman, *Ancient Jewish and Christian Perceptions of Crucifixion*, 11 and n. 47.

12. “Did Christ Die on a Cross,” 166.

13. See also Longenecker, *The Cross before Constantine*, 62-64.

14. Quoted in Chapman and Schnabel, *Trial and Crucifixion of Jesus*, 283–84.

15. See Cook, *Crucifixion in the Mediterranean World*, 52–57.

16. Quoted in Chapman and Schnabel, *Trial and Crucifixion of Jesus*, 312; see also Cook, *Crucifixion in the Mediterranean World*, 272-73.

17. See especially John Granger Cook, “Crucifixion as Spectacle in Roman Campania.” *Novum Testamentum* 54 (2012): 68–100.

18. A convenient roundup of images and drawings of the graffito may be seen in the blog note by Ronald V. Huggins, “[A Place for Alexamenos Palatine Graffito](#) (Stuff),” March 24, 2013. See also Longenecker, *The Cross before Constantine*, 73–75.

19. Nico Haas, “Anthropological Observations on the Skeletal Remains from Giv’at ha-Mivtar,” *Israel Exploration Journal* 20 (1970): 38–59.

20. Joseph Zias and Eliezer Sekeles, “The Crucified Man from Giv’at ha-Mivtar: A Reappraisal,” *Israel Exploration Journal* 35 (1985): 22–27. See also John J. Davis, “Rethinking the Crucified Man from Giv’at ha-Mivtar,” *Bible and Spade* (Fall 2002).

[21.](#) See especially Larry W. Hurtado, “The Staurogram in Early Christian Manuscripts: The Earliest Visual Reference to the Crucified Jesus?” in *New Testament Manuscripts: Their Text and Their World*, ed. Thomas J. Kraus and Tobias Nicklas (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 207–26; cf. the brief but helpful overview in Longenecker, *The Cross before Constantine*, 106–110.

[22.](#) Cf. Longenecker, *The Cross before Constantine*, 163–66.

[23.](#) John 19:17 states that Jesus carried his own cross. Traditionally, these statements have been understood to mean that Jesus left Pilate’s presence carrying the cross and then on the way Simon of Cyrene was enlisted to carry it the rest of the way.

[24.](#) Chapman and Schnabel, *Trial and Crucifixion of Jesus*, 282–92.