CRUCIFIXION IN THE ANCIENT WORLD:
A RESPONSE TO L.L. WELBORN

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1. Introduction

There is a wide gulf between twenty-first century North American society and the culture in which Paul lived. In the modern world, there has been a push to foster a respect for life and the rights of the individual, which would encompass protecting them from torture. This, however, was not the case during the Roman Empire, which preyed on the fear of imperial punishment embedded within those living in the first century AD. Arguably the cruellest and most feared form of punishment was that of crucifixion. It is difficult for modern scholars to understand the dread that this symbol of Roman power invoked, and the shame and humiliation that was associated with it.

This paper will begin with a discussion of the nature of crucifixion within the ancient world and how it was utilized by the Romans as a form of capital punishment and a means to ultimately disgrace the victim. However, in addition to shaming and killing the victim, the use of the cross as a means of punishment was also a political tool and a symbol used by the Romans to maintain fear and to exert control over subjected provinces. This will be followed by an evaluation of Welborn’s work and his attempt to interpret 1 Corinthians 1 in light of the comic-philosophic tradition. This paper concludes by stating that the optimal means of interpreting Paul’s phrase “the word of the cross is foolishness” is not in terms of the ancient mime, but in relationship to the nature of the cross and its incomprehensibility as a religious symbol in light of its use within the Roman Empire and the shame and humiliation that it was designed to invoke.
At its height, the Roman Empire was a vast civilization which exerted its influence over a number of conquered nations. Due to the fact that the Roman Empire was so expansive, it was difficult to ensure order and maintain compliance by the different regions. As a result, the Roman elite adopted a lethal form of punishment that was so cruel that it was feared by all people.

Although the Romans were not the first to practice the punishment of crucifixion, which was developed by the Carthaginians and utilized by the Persians and Alexander the Great, they are the ones who made it most well-known. It is generally agreed that crucifixion was a degrading and disgusting matter and, as a result, mention of it was frowned upon and discouraged in the works of a number of cultured writers. It was considered poor form among the elites to discuss such a base concept and, correspondingly, mention of crucifixion is generally absent in the writings of some of the more refined Latin writers such as: Pliny the younger, Statius, Lucretius, and, for the most part, Virgil. Cicero

1 For some references to Persian crucifixions see Herodotus 1.128.2; 3.125.3; 3.132.2; 3.159.1; 4.43.2; 6.30.1; 7.194.1–2; Thucydides 1.110.1. For Carthaginians see Polybius 1.11.5; 1.24.6; 1.79.4–5. For references to other nationalities, such as Scythians, Celts, Germans, and Thrace, who utilized crucifixion as a form of punishment, see L.L. Welborn, Paul, the Fool of Christ: A Study of 1 Corinthians 1–4 in the Comic-Philosophic Tradition (EEC; JSNTSup 293; New York: T&T Clark, 2005), 130 n. 87; James S. Jeffers, The Greco-Roman World of the New Testament Era: Exploring the Background of Early Christianity (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 158; Raymond E. Brown, The Death of the Messiah: From Gethsemane to the Grave, A Passion Narrative in the Four Gospels (ABRL; New York: Doubleday, 1994), 945–946. There is also some debate surrounding whether or not the Jewish people used crucifixion, with Ernst Bammel stating that it was used in the Jewish courts since the second century BC. Ernst Bammel, “Crucifixion as Punishment in Palestine,” in Ernst Bammel (ed.), The Trial of Jesus (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 163–165, 165. See also J. Fitzmyer, “Crucifixion in Ancient Palestine, Qumran Literature and the New Testament,” CBQ 40 (1978), 493–513. In the Joseph story in Gen 40:19 there appears to be a reference to the baker being raised up and hung on a tree (ξυύλον) for the birds to devour. This same event is recounted in Josephus, Ant. 2.77 in which Josephus states that the baker was actually crucified. Feldman critiques this by claiming that it would be anachronistic to view the baker’s death in such a manor and, although there might have been similarities to hanging on a tree, this does not indicate that it was an actual crucifixion. Louis H. Feldman, Plutus Josephus, Judean Antiquities 1–4: Translation and Commentary (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 153.