

# 1. THE NIGHT BEFORE CHRISTMAS

*“Well, that’s Western art for you. A thousand years of crucifixions,  
then stripes.”*

— A visitor to the National Gallery, London,  
as reported on Twitter, 2017<sup>3</sup>

“A thousand years of crucifixions, then stripes.” As a summary of the history of Western art, it goes without saying that this statement is ridiculously reductionistic (did I mention this was on Twitter?). But still... have you been to the National Gallery? If you were to whizz through its Western Art section and then write a tweet-length summary, you might struggle to improve on this quote.

Behind the humour, the quip gets at something remarkable: Jesus Christ, and especially his gruesome death, has towered above Western civilization. The cross is the most globally recognised symbol, certainly of religion, but perhaps of anything.

This fact is remarkable not just for the scale of the impact but for the event that is being commemorated. An outsider

---

<sup>3</sup> <https://twitter.com/sannevman/status/874624753092489216?s=20>. Accessed 2nd November 2021.

to Christianity and its art might expect depictions of Christ's birth to predominate, or his baptism, or anything really—anything other than his violent death. The idea of presenting a tortured man as art is subversive to say the least. To claim—as Christians do—that the man on the cross was *God* is the most revolutionary notion the world has ever entertained.

One of the signs that we are children of this particular revolution is the fact that we can stroll through the climate-controlled corridors of a gallery and, upon entering the religious wing, proceed to nod sagely at dozens of depictions of death by torture. “Ah, sacred art!” we sigh. For the most part this incongruity goes unnoticed. Yet this only proves the immense impact of the Jesus movement. The way we see the cross has been revolutionised because the cross has revolutionised the way we see.

To make my point, let me contrast the “sacred art” of the National Gallery with a much older portrayal of the cross. The earliest surviving depiction of Christ's crucifixion is a piece of graffiti mocking the strange new cult called Christianity. It was found scratched into the plaster of a wall on Rome's Palatine Hill. The graffiti shows a figure on a cross with the body of a man and the head of a donkey. Standing by the cross is a devotee with his hand raised in veneration. The caption says it all: “Alexamenos worships his god”.

Comedy doesn't always hold up over time, but the mockery here hits its mark today just as powerfully as it would have done 2,000 years ago. The message is clear:

a man on a cross is not a God; he's an ass. Anyone who venerates such a figure is a fool at best and probably perverse.

It's worth asking ourselves the question: who sees the cross more clearly—the Roman mocker or the sacred artist? As we press into this topic, we will consider that we are the weird ones. In this chapter we will step into the sandals of the Romans, to see the world as they saw it. No Roman would show a casual appreciation of crucifixion. Their reaction would be as different to ours as night is to day. If the coming of Christ has been a new dawn (Christians certainly think so), then this chapter explores the nighttime before that first Christmas.

## THE SLAVE'S DEATH

*“Wretched is the loss of one’s good name in the public courts, wretched, too, a monetary fine exacted from one’s property, and wretched is exile ... But the executioner, the veiling of heads, and the very word “cross,” let them all be far removed from not only the bodies of Roman citizens but even from their thoughts, their eyes, and their ears ... the mere mention of them [is] unworthy of a Roman citizen and a free man.”<sup>4</sup>*

So said Cicero (106–43 BC), one of history’s greatest orators. Notice here the concern for honour and the disdain of shame. Worthiness and wretchedness were

---

<sup>4</sup> M. Tullius Cicero, *Speech before Roman Citizens on Behalf of Gaius Rabirius, Defendant Against the Charge of Treason*, ed. William Blake Tyrrell. <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.02.0023%3Achapter%3D5%3Asection%3D16>. Accessed 28th October 2021.

the heaven and hell of the ancient world. To Cicero and his peers, “one’s good name”, one’s citizenship, one’s free status were paramount. To lose them was to lose everything. No wonder, then, that the very mention of the cross was a horror to Cicero. Crucifixion was of course extremely painful. (We get our word “excruciating” from the Latin *ex crucis*: “from the cross”.) Yet, more than this, it was humiliating. To be impaled, naked, before the watching world was as undignified an end as the Romans could devise. And the shame was a large part of the point.

To us, the cross has become a sacred symbol and, as such, embodies the very opposite of its ancient meaning. Even if we’re not religious ourselves, we might understand the cross to be a symbol of redemption, salvation, God’s presence even among the lowly, and God’s peace even amid our pain. In the ancient world it meant the reverse. It symbolised degradation, worthlessness, unremitting torture and unredeemed loss—“the extreme penalty”, according to Roman historian Tacitus.<sup>5</sup> Corpses cut down from the cross would routinely be cast into a ditch to be pecked at by birds and eaten by dogs. Those crucified were garbage.

The cross was “the slave’s punishment”.<sup>6</sup> Roman society, as with every ancient culture, was arranged as a vertiginously steep hierarchy. That hierarchy was not simply one of rank or role; it was a hierarchy of *being*. The punishments of the state were an expression—and an

---

5 Tacitus, *Historiae* 4.11.

6 Tacitus, *Annals* 15.44.

enforcement—of this hierarchy. Certain classes of people could not be crucified and certain classes could.

Cicero called crucifixion “the most miserable and most painful punishment, appropriate to slaves alone”.<sup>7</sup> While it was proper to crucify slaves, Cicero went on to discuss the horrors of an incident when a Roman citizen had been mistakenly crucified. “It is a crime to bind a Roman citizen; to scourge him is a wickedness; to put him to death is almost parricide [killing a parent]. What shall I say of crucifying him? So guilty an action cannot by any possibility be adequately expressed by any name bad enough for it.”<sup>8</sup> Crucifixion was either “appropriate” or an unspeakable evil, depending on who was on the cross.

In AD 61 a Roman senator was killed by one of his slaves. Custom dictated that every slave in the household—all four hundred of them—must be crucified. Some in Rome objected, said Tacitus, and “shrank from extreme rigour” in carrying out the sentence. But the majority in the Senate agreed with Cassius Caius, who spoke powerfully in favour of the mass execution. Quite obviously, to Caius, tradition was to trump any feelings of pity. He asked, “Is it your pleasure to search for arguments in a matter already weighed in the deliberations of wiser men than ourselves?” The ancients had spoken; who were moderns to object? (You will notice this is the very

---

7 M. Tullius Cicero, *Against Verres*, ed. C.D. Yonge. <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.02.0018%3Atext%3DVer.%3AAactio%3D2%3Abook%3D5%3Asection%3D169>. Accessed 29th October 2021.

8 As above. <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.02.0018%3Atext%3DVer.%3AAactio%3D2%3Abook%3D5%3Asection%3D170>. Accessed 2nd November 2021.

opposite of today's belief in progress.) Against those who worried that some innocents may die, Caius argued, "There is some injustice in every great precedent, which, though injurious to individuals, has its compensation in the public advantage". Here is an argument for "the greater good", where individuals are sacrificed to the public advantage. Why? To set a precedent. To make an example. "It is only by terror you can hold in such a motley rabble." It was only terror that maintained the caste system of Rome. Only by terror could the few nobles "live singly amid numbers, safe among a trembling throng".<sup>9</sup>

Such arguments carried the day and 400 men, women and children, were dragged to 400 crosses. Thus was upheld the wisdom of the ancients, the greater good of the empire, and the terrorising of the masses. Deterrence was the goal and crucifixion a major tool. Sometimes the injustice of it all was the very point being made. To see "the slaves' punishment" inflicted publicly on, sometimes, hundreds of the unwashed masses—even innocents—was to see their worthlessness in the starkest terms. The powers that be killed *those people* because they could. And the more they butchered them, the more they felt able to butcher them. As one victim of Roman brutality said, "[our torturers were commanded] to think and act as if we no longer existed".<sup>10</sup> To see someone crucified was to

---

9 Tacitus, "The Murder of Pedanius Secundus". <https://faculty.tnstate.edu/tcourse/H1210revised/tacitus.html>. Accessed 27th October 2021.

10 "The Writings of Phileas the Martyr describing the Occurrences at Alexandria." <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf201.iii.xiii.xi.html?scrBook=Phil&scrCh=2&scrV=6#highlight>. Accessed 27th October 2021.

watch their un-person-ing and to hear the message, *Do not go the way of this wretch.*

This is not to say that the onlookers disliked watching. On the contrary, executions were wildly popular. Crucifixions were always public and would sometimes form part of the gladiatorial games. In Rome they could gather a quarter of a million spectators to watch exquisite horrors, including crucifixions as half-time entertainment. Slaves fighting to the death was the meat and potatoes, but the spice was often provided by wild animals devouring prisoners, or perhaps even raping them and then eating them. It was even boasted at the time that the *bestiarii* (the wild-animal tamers) could train a bull to rape its victim first—or at least simulate the attack. All this was to the delight of the crowd and the honour of the gods, who took the form of beasts to rape women. These bloody re-enactments of ancient scenes—whether divine, military or bestial—were a particular favourite of the crowds.

Such inventive and grotesque brutality valued spectacle dear and life cheap. In Caligula's reign (AD37–41), there was a time of scarcity when meat needed to feed the games' beasts became too expensive. The emperor's solution was to order all the city's prisoners, whether they'd received a trial or not, to be fed to the starving animals. In Rome some kinds of people could be pet food. In truth, these victims weren't even "people"—certainly not in a way that would be recognisable to our modern sensibilities.

Yet far from this hierarchy of value being lamented, it was lauded. It was just. This is what "Nature herself" taught.

## WHAT NATURE TEACHES

*“Nature herself intimates that it is just for the better to have more than the worse, the more powerful than the weaker... Justice consists in the superior ruling over and having more than the inferior.”*

*(Plato, 428–438 BC)*

*“For that some should rule and others be ruled is a thing not only necessary, but expedient; from the hour of their birth, some are marked out for subjection, others for rule.” (Aristotle, 384–322 BC)*

The Greek philosopher Plato, together with his teacher Socrates (470–399 BC) and his student, Aristotle, are considered the fathers of Western philosophy. It’s often said that the history of thought following Plato consists, basically, of footnotes to his teaching. Even the mighty Romans had to admit that when it came to *intellectual* firepower, the Greeks led the way. No Roman—indeed, no ancient—would have quibbled with the views expressed above. And yet they are the very reverse of our modern thinking. We consider “justice” to mean the equalising of persons. The classical world considered justice as the enforcement of inequality; that was what nature intended.

To Plato and Aristotle it was obvious that certain humans were born to be “living tools”: machines to be used by others. The other name for this is slaves.

Often, classical writers such as Plato or Aristotle are cited as having “defended slavery”. In truth, they did no such thing—because no one was attacking it. No one

thought to. It wasn't just that the entire economy was built on slavery; politics and religion were too. In fact, the very fabric of being, as understood by the ancients, had slavery woven into it. As Larry Siedentop comments, "At the core of ancient thinking [was] the assumption of natural inequality".<sup>11</sup>

Ancient philosophers did not think of themselves as defenders or even teachers of such inequality. "Nature herself" taught that some were fitter, stronger, smarter, and, frankly, better than others. There were superior races (Greeks over barbarians), superior sexes (men over women), and superior classes (free men over slaves). The deformity and inferiority of barbarians, women and slaves was clear from their very nature. How could anyone deny that some people can govern well, while others need governing?

This much was obvious to every member of the classical world, wherever they found themselves in the hierarchy of being. Certainly, there were those who sought a change to the status quo. A revolt of the slaves was something always to be guarded against—hence the need for violent deterrents like crucifixion. But when inferiors reached for greater status, power, freedom or goods, they were seeking for advantages, not rights—for privilege, not justice. As Plato states above, justice *was* your superiors ruling over you. That was what nature decreed, and those most in tune with reason could see that. The position which fate had assigned you was simply your just deserts.

---

11 Larry Siedentop, *Inventing the Individual* (Penguin, 2015), p 51.

The wisdom of the people, distilled in teaching like Aesop's fables (7th century BC), reinforced this message. One of Aesop's tales told of a lizard who wished to be a stag, but when he saw the stag hunted and killed, he ceased from his foolish ambition. He ends the fable glad of his own ignominious spot in the food chain. Likewise, there was the lizard who wished to be long like a snake. He stretched himself out beyond his proper bounds and—stupid lizard!—burst.

These stories teach the opposite lesson to our modern tales. Nowadays the hero casts off the shackles of tradition and hierarchy to release their awesome inner potential. Perhaps that's a better lesson, perhaps not—what is undeniable is the difference. Ancient people were taught in a thousand ways to “know their place”. And their place was not just their rank in society; it was their position in the cosmos—their position in the great hierarchy of being. Religion was, therefore, an integral part of their lives.

#### **WHAT RELIGION TEACHES**

In a sense, there is no need for this as a distinct section. As we discuss ancient religion, we're not really moving to another subject, at least, not as far as ancient peoples were concerned. As we'll see when we get to chapter 5, it is only as a result of the Christian revolution that we now tend to distinguish between a secular and a sacred realm. As modern people, we think of the public, tangible, everyday operations of the world—the realm of science, commerce, politics, and so on. We then contrast this with the personal, inward realm of “religion”. When I think of

“the secular sphere”, I imagine a 1980s corporate video with upbeat synth pop music and shots of business-suited New Yorkers bustling to work. When I think “religious”, I think of soft-focused church scenes, a lone choirboy singing, a lone candle, a lone pray-er. The latter is a peculiar hobby of the few; the former is what makes the world go round.

But this divide would have been alien to the ancient world. They would never have thought, for instance, to separate politics and religion. Politics concerned the affairs of the *polis*, the Greek word for city. Yet the city was an aggregation *not* of individuals, as we might understand them, but of families. At the head of each family was the father of the household (the *paterfamilias*). He was the oldest male, who held life-or-death power over every other family member. His most vital role was as priest of the family cult, to maintain worship to the family’s gods, to keep the fires of the hearth burning as proper honour to their ancestors, and to hand over such sacred duties to the eldest son. When these families united into larger clans and cities, the gods were a crucial aspect of such associations. Agreements—whether commercial, military or political—were ratified by the gods and by sacred acts. To be a citizen was to share in the worship of the city’s gods.

Even when Athens experimented with what it called “democracy”, it was a thoroughly religious enterprise. Instead of a mon-archy (rule by one), or olig-archy (rule by a few), demo-cracy was the “power of the people”. The crucial question is, of course, whom did the Greeks consider to be “the people”? When we consider “the

people”, we might think of a group of individuals who stand equally under the same law. But that’s our Christianity coming through. Instead, the fundamental unit for the ancient world (and for much of the non-Christian world today) was the family. When these family units united, it was the “fathers” who came together. Under “democracy” these priestly heads of households were able to vote on a range of matters or candidates, but their options had already been limited by casting lots or consulting, say, the Delphic Oracle. It was divination more than democracy that ruled Athens. So while, at points, a minority of elite males may have had the vote, it was the gods who called the shots. Everything—from the rule of the city to the outcome of wars, to the success of the crops, to the study of the heavenly spheres—was “religious” to the core.

Therefore, to understand ancient people, we need to understand their religious thinking. Let’s do that now by outlining some of their origins stories. The creation myths of old give a vivid impression of the way people saw the gods, themselves and the world around them.

### **BORN TO SLAVE**

In the beginning there was chaos. Then rebellion. Then war. Then slavery. Then us. So said the myths of the ancient Near East.

The Babylonian creation story serves as a typical tale. In the *Enuma Elish*, most of the story concerns the battles of the gods prior to creation. Eventually it is Marduk who slays Tiamat, whose body is split into sky and land (heaven and earth). 300 of the gods are assigned to the sky and 600 to the land, and humanity is made by the

sacrifice of a god so that “the toil of the gods will be laid” on humans. “From [Kingu’s] blood [Ea] created mankind, on whom he imposed the service of the gods, [to] set the gods free.”<sup>12</sup>

This is a recurring theme in the ancient myths. Humanity is made from bloodshed and formed for slavery. Compare the Mesopotamian *Atrahasis* myth, where it says, “Create primeval man, that he may bear the yoke! Let him bear the yoke ... Let man bear the load of the gods!”<sup>13</sup> Yet again humanity is made by sacrificing a god (this time the unfortunate deity is Geshtu-E), and yet again humanity is pressed into hard labour.

According to the Greek myths, our origins involve chaos, warfare and slavery—yes—but also plenty of jealousy and sex too. The Greeks spoke of Gaia (earth), Ouranos (heaven/sky), and Tartaros (the underworld). Gaia and Ouranos have children: Titans. But Gaia also gives birth to monsters—cyclops—who disgust Ouranos. He hurls them into Tartaros. Gaia decides to take revenge by getting one of her sons, Kronos, to chop off Ouranos’s genitals. In an unexpected silver lining to this marital feud, the blood of his genitals creates Aphrodite, goddess of love and beauty. Just when you thought romance was dead.

Kronos marries his sister Rhea but then fears that his children will cut him up, so, in a pre-emptive strike, he swallows them as soon as they’re each born. Rhea

---

12 Enuma Elish, 29-34. <http://www.usu.edu/markdamen/ANE/lectures/10.1.pdf>. Accessed 29th October 2021.

13 *Atrahasis*, Tablet 1. <https://geha.paginas.ufsc.br/files/2017/04/Atrahasis.pdf>. Accessed 29th October 2021.

manages to save her sixth-born, Zeus, who grows up, nurtured by a goat in a Cretan cave. He returns to trick Kronos into vomiting up his other children. Zeus then forges an alliance with his regurgitated sibling gods. They are the Olympians, and they fight the Titans. Long story short, the Olympians win, and Zeus cuts up Kronos (just as Kronos had feared), throwing the pieces into Tartaros. Zeus becomes king of the gods with Poseidon ruling over the seas and Hades ruling the underworld.

Where does humanity fit in? For our existence, we have Prometheus to thank. Prometheus was a Titan, but he was not thrown into Tartaros with his fellow Titans because he had not fought in the war. Together with others, Prometheus is tasked with making humans. He forges man from the dust; Athena breathes life into him, but, for the crowning touch, Prometheus, against Zeus's wishes, steals fire from the sun and gives it to man. (Titans love humans more than Olympians do.) For this rebellious act, Prometheus is chained to a rock and has his liver eaten by an eagle, and then regrown, and then eaten again, and then regrown. And then... You get the idea.

These are our origins: chaos, violence, and death. And this is the case wherever we turn in the ancient world. The Romans adopted much of the Greek mythology, performing more of a rebrand than a rewrite. Zeus was now "Jupiter", Aphrodite was "Venus", Poseidon was "Neptune"; but the stories contained the same themes of jealousies, intrigues and brutality. One significant update was the Roman take on Ares, the Greek god of war. Where the Greeks considered Ares to be a destructive and contemptible force, the Romans loved their version, Mars.

He was the very picture of virility, second only to Jupiter in the pantheon. He fathered the founders of Rome—Romulus and Remus—by his rape of the unsuspecting mortal Rhea Silvia. When considering the origins stories of Roman mythology, it's fair to say that the city itself was the focus. The Romans' vision for the cosmos was very much centred on Rome, the "Eternal City". And that city was born of war and rape.

### PROPPING UP THE COSMOS

In this chapter we have been attempting to stand in the sandals of a Roman. In particular we want to see the cross in the way they saw it. It's nearly impossible to do this since our weird western values get in the way. As we hear of rape and violence, inequality and brutality, slavery and death-by-torture, our modern sensibilities kick in. We find it hard to accept these as "the way things are". We certainly find it difficult to consider them as "the way things *should* be". But a Roman took all of this in their stride. And as they stood at the foot of a cross, they had a gutter-level view of the whole terrifying structure of reality that towered above. The cross came down from violent powers on high to crush the contemptible and maintain the "just" order of the empire—in fact, of the cosmos. To look upon a victim of crucifixion was to see a man at rock bottom.

And then Christians came along and said, "We see something else". Their claim was the most revolutionary imaginable: that God himself had hung on a cross. Not Mars, obviously. When Mars came in peace, he sheathed his spear as a sign of his magnanimity. The Christian

God did not sheath his spear. Quite the opposite: he had one plunged into his heart by a Roman soldier as he died the death of a slave. And the first people to call this figure “God” were the last people you would expect. Christianity began as a Jewish movement. All Christ’s earliest followers were Jews. And they all called him God. When a Jew said “God”, they did not mean a member of the Greek or Roman pantheon, and they did not mean a squabbling deity from the Babylonian myths. They meant “the Maker of heaven and earth, the Source of life and being”. And yet, in the first instance, it was Jews who became Christians, and they did so by looking to a crucified man and declaring, “Behold our God”!

What would a Roman—breathing Roman air, kept in check by Roman brutalities, raised on Roman myths—make of the Christian claim? They would, of course, consider Christ an ass, his worshippers fools and his religion a perversity. If Roman citizens could not bear to have the name of the cross on their lips, what sort of God would show up as its victim?

“The message of the cross is foolishness,” admitted Paul, a 1st-century Jew-turned-Christian who spent decades preaching this message around the Mediterranean. “But,” he added, “to us who are being saved it is the power of God” (1 Corinthians 1:18). Paul went on to write half the New Testament, and he summarised his basic message as an obsession with “Christ and him crucified” (2:2). He presented the crucifixion of Jesus as a stark dividing line, with some deriding it and some devoted to it. Naturally speaking, a 1st-century hearer could only find it stupid, and a particularly shameful kind of stupid too. “God on

a cross” was painfully imbecilic as an idea. And yet for Christians, something about it made sense—it made sense of their lives and their world. They felt themselves to have been met by the God of heaven, who had deigned to stoop. For them, rock bottom became ground zero. The cross was the epicentre of an earthquake whose reverberations shook every earthly certainty. The Highest had plumbed the lowest depths and begun a radical movement to upend the world.

Paul and his other 1st-century contemporaries persisted with their foolish preaching, and, remarkably, they gained a hearing. Over time their belief that Christ crucified was also “the power of God” began to look less and less ridiculous because a power seemed to be at work. A movement was beginning. First minds changed, then lives, then communities, then cultures, then everything. Eventually this foolish message became the most influential in human history.

Now the idea of humble sacrifice has gone from shameful to glorious. Now we consider equality, compassion, freedom and all the weird western values this book explores as obvious. Now we wander blithely through galleries to gaze upon “a thousand years of crucifixions”. Whatever moral earthquake occurred, its impact has been seismic. The rest of this book will examine it.

*This is an excerpt from The Air We Breathe by Glen Scrivener, releasing June 1, 2022. Preorder your copy at:*

[www.thegoodbook.co.uk/breathe](http://www.thegoodbook.co.uk/breathe)  
[www.thegoodbook.com/breathe](http://www.thegoodbook.com/breathe)  
[www.thegoodbook.com.au/breathe](http://www.thegoodbook.com.au/breathe)  
[www.thegoodbook.co.nz/breathe](http://www.thegoodbook.co.nz/breathe)

