

Was Jesus Crucified Naked?

A gentleman heard me on the radio and was concerned. I had mentioned on the air that one of the great humiliations of a crucifixion was that a man was crucified naked. This thoughtful gentleman wrote to challenge my comments. Below is his e-mail and my response.

Dear Mr. Ray,

Please correct your description of the Passion. You have said that Christ was crucified naked on the cross because it was the Roman way of executing condemned prisoners.

Realize that in Christ's case the Romans were following instructions of the Jews---Pilate did not want to crucify Jesus, thus he finally gave orders that the soldiers do as the Jews requested. Thus the gospel explicitly describes how the Jews requested the legs of the condemned be broken so that their dead bodies would be removed before the Passover, and this was done per their request.

Nudity in 1st century Jewish culture brought shame to the beholder, and it was the Jews that had Jesus crucified---thus Jesus would have had a cloth to cover his loins, which is consistent with the visions of various mystics of the Church. Otherwise, the gospels would have mentioned the Jewish displeasure, much like it does with their demand to remove the sign above Christ's head, had Pilate ordered Jesus to be stripped completely naked against the wishes of the Temple leaders.

God bless, A Friend

In my response I wrote, Dear Friend:

Thanks for writing — and for your thoughtful comments. I always appreciate feedback especially from studious listeners. Please take my comments below in the irenic tone in which you kindly wrote to me.

However, I disagree with your assessment. There is no reason to believe that Jesus was crucified according to Jewish “specifications.” The Romans had little regard for the Jews, their laws and their sensibilities (e.g., Acts 18:12-17).

The Jews were very scandalized by the sign put on the Cross “Jesus, King of the Jews.” Yet when the Jews specifically went back to Pilate with the demand it be reworded, the Romans refused to change it or take it down even though that was probably more offensive to the Jews than the nakedness of a convicted criminal. Jews were also limited in the number of lashes one could receive, but they certainly paid no heed to that Jewish concern either. They were there to uphold Roman law, not cater to Jewish religious sentiments.

You say the Romans were instructed to do what the Jews requested, but that had only to do with Pilate's willingness to grant the Jews request to have Jesus crucified instead of just flogged. It did not mean that the Romans wrote down a list of the Jewish sensibilities to insure that none of them were upset. The Romans were to do what the Jews requested only, presumably, in terms of their willingness to allow Jesus to be crucified even though Pilate found him innocent.

Even among the Jewish rabbis there was allowance for nakedness during execution. The *Mishnah* (Jewish tradition from earlier centuries compiled around 200 AD) records three opinions held among the Jews, saying,

A. [When] he was four cubits from the place of stoning, they remove his clothes.

B. "In the case of a man, they cover him up in front, and in the case of a woman, they cover her up in front and behind," the words of R. Judah.

C. And sages say, "A man is stoned naked, but a woman is not stoned naked."

Here we have the recording of three Jewish traditions. Two out of three claim that a man was executed naked even among his own Jewish countrymen. If even the Jews stripped their own criminals naked according to two out of three of their traditions, why would we think the Romans would practice more modesty and scruples than the Jews? In fact, the purpose of the crucifixion was the utter humiliation and degradation of the person so executed.

I would agree he was robed on the Via Cruses, but even Scripture says they divided his garments but for the outer garments they cast lots. There is NO indication that he retained covering, rather the soldiers divided them - outer and under clothes.

You mention various Mystics who have "revealed" that Jesus was covered on the cross. I suspect this has to do with pious puritanism more than historical reality. I often enjoy the writings of mystics and am benefited from them, but I don't have a lot of confidence in their often contradicting visions, especially when it contradicts historical realities and Scripture.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* refers to these revelations of Mystics in a category called "private revelation." Commenting on private revelation the Church teaches,

"Throughout the ages, there have been so-called "private" revelations, some of which have been recognized by the authority of

the Church. They do not belong, however, to the deposit of faith. It is not their role to improve or complete Christ's definitive Revelation, but to help live more fully by it in a certain period of history. Guided by the magisterium of the Church, the *sensus fidelium* knows how to discern and welcome in these revelations whatever constitutes an authentic call of Christ or his saints to the Church. (*no. 67*)

One good historical commentary says,

"The replacement of Jesus' own clothes for the walk to Golgotha was probably a concession to Jewish scruples about public nakedness (Jub. 3:30–31; cf. Gen 9:20–27). Crucifixion was normally naked, and in v. 35 Jesus' clothes will again have been removed; m. Sanh. 6:3 specifies that the clothes should be removed only at the place of execution, not on the way there."

An excellent commentary on the details of the life of Christ relays,

"Even though Jesus has been flogged, Mark/Matt have Jesus dressed again before he sets out to the place of crucifixion. Normally the criminal, carrying the lateral beam of the cross behind his neck with his arms fastened to it, would go naked to the place of crucifixion, being scourged as he went. We know this from passing references in Dionysius of Halicarnassus (*Roman Antiquities* 7.69.2) and Valerius Maximus (*Facta* 1.7.4).

"Indeed, Josephus (*Ant.* 19.4.5; #270) reports that even Roman nobles involved in the assassination of Gaius Caligula had their clothes removed before being taken to the place of execution. **In having the final disrobing of Jesus only at the place of execution** (Mark 15:24 and par.), the evangelist may reflect a local

concession that the Romans made to the Jewish abhorrence of public nudity.

“Josephus reports that the Roman tribune Celer, who was executed in Jerusalem by imperial order, was dragged across the whole city as a public spectacle before being beheaded; but there is no mention of his being disrobed (*War* 2.12.7; #246; *Ant.*20.6.3; #136).”

Another commentator says,

"To distribute the garments of Christ among the soldiers, the clothes had to be removed from Christ. Thus, Christ was crucified naked. The suffering was great at the crucifixion but so was the shame. No artist dares to picture Christ as naked—they put a loin cloth around Him for modesty. But Scripture indicates He was naked."

Another says,

"[T]he normal undergarment was either a tunic or a loincloth, and Jesus' tunic was taken from him (v. 23; Brown 1970:902), it is perhaps more likely he was naked. Early Christian tradition is divided on the subject (cf. Brown 1994:2:953).”

Catholic Monk and prolific writer Thomas A Kempis wrote a meditative prayer on the death of Christ including the words,

"Of the Crucifixion, naked, of the Lord Jesus; and of His hanging for many long hours aloft upon the Cross.”

In my opinion and others, there is NO reason to believe that the Romans covered Jesus' privates with a loin cloth. In fact, it would be unreasonable

to think they would do this since crucifixion was to be the final humiliation and degradation. They had very little respect for Jewish sensibilities in general.

Even if they made a concession to the Jews by covering him as he processed through the streets, they would have removed his clothes at the site of the execution, even as the Jews did with their own executions. Roman custom gave the soldiers the right to appropriate for themselves all the clothes of the convict - kind of as a bonus.

And if you suggest they crucified Jesus with his loins covered, do you suggest that ALL executions were done with private parts covered? Were the thieves on his right and left also covered? I don't think they treated Jesus differently than any other criminals crucified.

Just a interesting parallel to ponder: The first Adam in a garden was naked in his innocence and due to sin had to be clothed and exiled from the garden; the last Adam was clothed but to enter back into the garden to redeem us he was stripped naked to restore our innocence. The first brought death at the tree of life, the last brought life at the tree of death.

In this regard The Fathers of the Church loved to speculate on the concept of the naked Christ. In that regard I suggest, Jesus born naked in a cave provided by a man named Joseph and he was then wrapped in swaddling clothes. In his death he was stripped of his clothes and later covered by a shroud and placed in a cave provided by another man named Joseph.

It certainly seems imprudent to discuss this to some with pious sensibilities, but the historical reality and truth does not bend to such sentimentality.

My friend, may you and those you love have a wonderful Easter and may the joy of our risen Lord Jesus shine in your heart for all of eternity. Thanks for your thoughtful e-mail.

Another person wrote in after reading this article and commented:

Jesus did specifically reveal to St. Bridget of Sweden when she visited a church in Rome, that he was indeed crucified naked. And the Blessed Mother also confirms this in her Rosary of the Seven Sorrows. The Catholic Church has not made any revelation part of their official church teaching, but they do not deny it either.

Steve Ray

PS. Here is a statue of a naked Christ on the cross sculpted by Michelangelo

[http://
www.michelangelo.net/
crucifix/](http://www.michelangelo.net/crucifix/)

