

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 men were 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

Following is my response,

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 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 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. With floggings, Jews were also limited in the number of lashes one could receive (Deut 25:3), but the Romans paid no heed to that Jewish concern either.¹ They were there to uphold Roman customs, 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 certainly did not mean that the Romans compiled a list of Jewish sensibilities to ensure that none of them were upset. Jews were not allowed to impose capital punishment (Jn 18:31-32). Only the Romans could sentence a man to crucifixion. Pilate agreed to the more extreme punishment (not to a lesser). Pilate ordered Jesus to be crucified as the Jews requested even though Pilate found him innocent.

Even among the Jews nakedness was customary during executions for men, but not for women. The *Mishnah* (a compilation of Jewish tradition and practice from earlier centuries compiled around 200 AD) records several opinions held among the Jews, saying,

Sanh. 6:3 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.

¹ The Jews limited the lashes to 40 to limit the physical harm and to prevent degrading their brother Israelite. The opposite was the case with the Romans who inflicted as much excruciating pain as possible, to quicken the crucifixion and to enhance the degradation of the victim. “While the Jews only allowed 39 lashes, the Romans had no such limit; many people who received such a beating died as a result” (Biblical Studies Press, *The NET Bible First Edition Notes* (Biblical Studies Press, 2006), Mt 27:26).

Judah.

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

Sotah VI G "A man [who incurs the death penalty] is stoned naked, but a woman is not stoned naked'."²

Here we have the recording of Jewish traditions and practices. Men were executed naked even among his own Jewish countrymen. If even the Jews stripped their own criminals naked, why would we think the Romans would impose 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 that Jesus was robed on the Via Cruses, but at Calvary Scripture says the soldiers removed his clothes and divided his garments among them. Two articles of clothing covered his body—his garments (outer robe) and his tunic (undergarment).

There is NO indication that he retained any covering; rather, the soldiers divided them into outer and under clothes. Roman custom gave the soldiers the right to appropriate for themselves all the clothes of the convict—kind of as a bonus.³

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 benefit from them. Still, I don't have a lot of confidence in their often contradictory visions, especially when contradicting historical realities and Scripture.

² Jacob Neusner, [*The Mishnah : A New Translation*](#) (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988), 453.

³ "It was customary to remove the clothing from a condemned man before he was crucified, and according to Roman law his clothes became the property of the executioners. The word translated *clothes* is the same word used in 13:4 (*TEV outer garment*). Here the reference is clearly to all clothes that Jesus was wearing." (Newman, Barclay Moon, and Eugene Albert Nida. *A Handbook on the Gospel of John*. UBS Handbook Series. New York: United Bible Societies, 1993).

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."⁴

Though stripped of cloths to be flogged along the way to the crucifixion, there may have been a concession in Jerusalem regarding the procession to Calvary, but the clothes were removed at the site of the execution. 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).

⁴ France, R. T. *The Gospel of Matthew*. The New International Commentary on the New Testament. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publication Co., 2007.

“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).”⁵

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."⁶

Melito, the 2nd AD bishop of Sardis, wrote about his sermon on the passion of Christ. Because people of his day had witnessed crucifixions, Melito knew that the victims were executed without clothing. Bishop Melito wrote,

The Sovereign has been made unrecognizable by his naked body, and is not even allowed a garment to keep him from view” (*Passion* 97; translation in Hall, *Melito*, 55).⁷

Catholic Monk and prolific writer Thomas A Kempis wrote of the crucifixion of Jesus using the word *naked* twenty-one times. Here are two examples,

⁵ Brown, Raymond E. *The Death of the Messiah and 2: From Gethsemane to the Grave*, a Commentary on the Passion Narratives in the Four Gospels. Vol. 1. New York; London: Yale University Press, 1994.

⁶ Butler, John G. *Analytical Bible Expositor: Luke*. Clinton, IA: LBC Publications, 2009.

⁷ *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*. Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016.

“[Mary] indeed has seen her most dearly-loved Son hang there above her, with His Body naked and covered with blood; she has seen Him growing paler and paler; she has seen Him in His agony; she has heard Him crying with a loud voice, as He yielded up the Ghost.⁸

“Alas for the spite of those extortioners, who had not even so much pity for Jesus hanging on the Cross, poor and naked, as to give Him back some little thing, or to leave even a shred of one of His garments for His sorrowing Mother to keep as a remembrance of Him Whom she had lost!”⁹

In my opinion, there is no reason to believe that the Romans covered Jesus’ private parts with a loin cloth. In fact, it would be unreasonable to think they would cover him since crucifixion was to be the final humiliation and degradation. I did find several authors who claimed that a loin cloth was, or may have been covering Christ, but they gave not a shred of evidence for such an accommodation.

The Roman soldiers had very little or no respect for Jewish sensibilities in general. Crucifixions were done at the city gates or along thoroughfares as huge billboards shouting “This is what happens to anyone who defies the power of Rome!” The goal was to make the exhibition excruciatingly painful and highly visible in the most degrading and humiliating way.

This can be seen with the gruesome display of 6,000 of Spartacus’ fellow slaves who were crucified along the Via Appia in 71 BC. It was a “billboard” miles long with crosses lining the road. Imagine walking the Via Appia from the port city into Rome with screaming men on crosses on both sides of the road for miles.

And if you suggest they crucified Jesus with his loins covered, do you suggest that ALL executions in Jerusalem were done with private parts

⁸ Thomas Haemerken à Kempis, *Prayers and Meditations on the Life of Christ*, trans. W. Duthoit (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., Ltd., 1904), 168.

⁹ Thomas Haemerken à Kempis, *Prayers and Meditations on the Life of Christ*, trans. W. Duthoit (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., Ltd., 1904), 121–122.

covered? Were the thieves on his right and left also covered? I don't think they treated Jesus differently than any other criminal crucified in any other city in the Roman Empire.

I will also answer two objections posted by a prominent priest. First, he claimed that "the Greek text mentions only the removal of the *himatia*, the outer garment. This is the case in the synoptic Gospels as well as John. This would seem to imply that Jesus' inner tunic remained."

However, he is clearly mistaken because in John's gospel it refers to the *himation* and the *chitōn* — therefore, both the outer and inner garments.

John 19:23 "When the soldiers had crucified Jesus, they took his garments (*himation*) and divided them into four parts, one part for each soldier; also his tunic (*chitōn*). But the tunic was seamless, woven in one piece from top to bottom,

Second, the priest also claims that "naked" does not necessarily mean completely naked—a Jew would consider naked as wearing undergarments but devoid of the outer robe. This may be the case in some situations, but it seems pretty clear that biblically naked generally means just that. Adam and Eve were naked in their primal innocence. Noah became drunk and "lay uncovered" and his son "saw the nakedness of his father" which precipitated a huge scandal and curse.

Here is an interesting parallel to ponder: The first Adam in a garden was naked in his innocence at a "tree of life".¹⁰ Due to sin Adam's nakedness was clothed and he was exiled from the garden. The last Adam, Jesus,¹¹ entered another garden¹² and was stripped naked at a "tree of death" to restore mankind's innocence. The first brought death at the Tree of Life, the last brought life at the tree of death. One was naked in innocence and then clothed; the second was clothed and stripped naked to restore innocence.

¹⁰ Genesis 2:25 "And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed."

¹¹ 1 Cor 15:45 "Thus it is written, "The first man Adam became a living being"; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit."

¹² John 19:41 "Now in the place where he was crucified there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb in which no one had yet been laid."

Thomas A’Kempis saw these parallels as well,

For as, in the Garden of Eden, before Paradise was lost, the first Adam went naked; so now Thou too dost, in like manner, ascend the Cross naked, to regain for us that lost Paradise, from which Adam was cast out, and driven forth.”¹³

The Fathers of the Church loved to speculate on the concept of the naked Christ. In that regard I suggest, Jesus was 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 died naked and later covered by a shroud and placed in a cave provided by another man named Joseph.

It may seem insensitive to discuss this with persons of pious presumptions, but historical reality and truth do not bend to sentimentality. However, I do believe it is quite proper to have the corpus of Jesus modestly covered on crucifixes in our churches.

Our objective is not to enforce on the populace a political obedience to the will of the Roman Empire. Our goals are quite the opposite. The Romans strove to humiliate and degrade Jesus on the cross. We, on the other hand, seek to respect, honor and properly adore our Lord and Savior. We never forget what he suffered for our sins, but we do so in a manner that is proper, decent and respectful.

We understand nakedness is something to be covered. The Catechism of the Catholic Church informs us, “Modesty protects the intimate center of the person” and “Purity requires modesty”.¹⁴ It is proper for modesty, decorum and decency to cover the loins of Jesus on the cross, especially in places of devotion and worship.

¹³ Thomas Haemerken à Kempis, [*Prayers and Meditations on the Life of Christ*](#), trans. W. Duthoit (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., Ltd., 1904), 106–108.

¹⁴ CCC 2521 “Purity requires *modesty*, an integral part of temperance. Modesty protects the intimate center of the person. It means refusing to unveil what should remain hidden. It is ordered to chastity to whose sensitivity it bears witness. It guides how one looks at others and behaves toward them in conformity with the dignity of persons and their solidarity.”

Having heard my comment on the radio, another person wrote,

Jesus did specifically reveal to St. Bridget of Sweden when she visited a church in Rome, that he was indeed crucified naked.¹⁵ And the Blessed Mother also confirms this in her Rosary of the Seven Sorrows.¹⁶ The Catholic Church has not made these private revelations part of their official church teaching, but they do not deny it either.

In very few instances has the naked corpus of Christ been displayed. Below is one of the exceptions. It is a statue of a naked Christ on the cross sculpted by Michelangelo in 1495 and displayed in the sacristy of the Basilica of Santo Spirito in Florence Italy. It is not in the main sanctuary of worship. For more information on this crucifix, visit <http://www.michelangelo.net/crucifix/>

¹⁵ “Then, led to the pillar, he stripped himself, and himself stretched his hands to the pillar, which his enemies pitiless bound. Now, while tied there he had no clothing, but stood as he was born, and suffered the shame of his nakedness.” (*Revelations of St. Bridget, on the Life and Passion of Our Lord*, Chapter 16.) “While I was at Mount Calvary weeping bitterly, I beheld my Lord, naked and scourged, led out by the Jews to be crucified, and diligently guarded by them.” (*Revelations of St. Bridget, on the Life and Passion of Our Lord*, Chapter 18.) However, in chapter 17 it says, “At an order he laid off his clothes, binding around his loins a small linen cloth, which to his consolation received.” It does not say where this “small linen cloth” was obtained.

¹⁶ “Offering Mass in the chapel of the Casa Santa Marta April 3, 2020 [Pope Francis] said: “The fifth sorrow of Our Lady is the death of Jesus, to see her Son there, crucified, naked, who dies.” <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/44082/pope-francis-reflect-on-the-seven-sorrows-of-mary-our-mother>

