



Digging Deeper

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The Crucifixion Sponge: Adding Insult to Injury

By Dr. Terry Harman

If you are Jewish or Christian, my intention is not to offend you with this blog post. But if you are one of the Roman soldiers at the crucifixion of Jesus, well I mean to call you out for your cruelty. Crucifixion in the 1st Century was a brutal exercise of capital punishment intended to strike fear in the inhabitants of the land. In the case of Jesus of Nazareth, the Roman soldiers added insult to injury.

Puzzling Detail

Upon a casual reading of the crucifixion narratives, I noticed a detail about the drink offered to Jesus as he was dying on the cross. Jesus is twice offered something to quench his thirst and wet his parched lips. The first offer is from a Roman soldier. Jesus refuses the first offer of a sponge soaked in "wine mixed with gall" as soon as he perceives what it is.

Yet, the second offer is from someone who appears to be from the crowd of onlookers. This person runs nearby and soaks a sponge on a "reed" in "sour wine" and then in kindness hoists the saturated sponge to the lips of the crucified Jesus and he receives the drink. Both drinks are the same, some mixture of wine. The traditional Christian answer is Jesus did not want anything to deaden the pain of his crucifixion because he was going to take upon himself the full weight of the sin of mankind. Then why did he receive the second offer of wine just before his death?

2 Sponges

There is an odd detail about the two sponges. The second sponge is attached to a branch of hyssop or a reed while no detail is given about the first sponge. I ask myself this question. Why are these details given and are the details important to our understanding of the events of that day?

Furthermore, why did the Roman soldiers have a sponge at the crucifixion? It's not like the soldier is near a kitchen and needs a sponge to clean his pots and pans. The crucifixion takes place on a rocky knoll called Golgotha so why would there be a need to soak a sponge in wine vinegar? Let's examine the narratives.

Humiliation Before Crucifixion

The Gospel narratives reveal the humiliating tactics of the Roman soldiers before the crucifixion of Jesus. The soldiers decided to have some fun humiliating Jesus after Pilate condemned him. Pilate did not personally carry out the severe flogging of Jesus but rather ordered his officers to do so.

Severe Flogging

The Romans employed three forms of corporal punishment,



each increasing in severity: beating (fustigatio), flogging (flagellatio), and severe flogging (verberatio or scourging). While the first form of punishment could sometimes stand-alone, the more severe forms were typically used as a precursor to crucifixion as part of a capital sentence. In this instance, the Greek verb translated as "flogged severely" indicates the most extreme form of punishment, verberatio. Such severe flogging was often deadly, as it had the potential to tear open the victim's body or slice through muscle and sinew down to the bone. The Romans would use a whip with fragments of bone or pieces of metal woven into the tips to carry out this punishment.

Jesus Before Pilate - Robe, Crown, and Staff

The scarlet robe, which was cheaply dyed and resembled a king's robe, probably refers to a military garment. They used this garment as a form of mockery to taunt Jesus, who was accused of being a king. By putting a crown of thorns on Jesus' head, they aimed to ridicule his claim to be a king, as it represented the "radiant corona" depicted on rulers' heads in the 1st century on coins and other artifacts. The statement "Hail, King of the Jews!" is a mockery imitating the Romans' cry of "Hail, Caesar!" or "Ave, Caesar!" In contemporary language, it would translate to "Long live the King of the Jews!" (1)

Matthew 27:27-31

Gathered the whole cohort around him. They stripped him and put a scarlet robe around him, and after braiding a crown of thorns, they put it on his head. They put a staff in his right hand and kneeling before him, they mocked him: "Hail, king of the Jews!" They spat on him and took the staff and struck him repeatedly on the head. 31 When they had mocked him, they stripped him of the robe and put his clothes back on him. Then they led him away to crucify him.

Mark 15:16-20

So the soldiers led him into the palace (that is, the governor's residence) and called together the whole cohort. They put a purple cloak on him and after braiding a crown of thorns, they put it on him. They began to salute him: "Hail, king of the Jews!" Again and again they struck him on the head with a staff and spit on him. Then they knelt down and paid homage to him. 20 When they had finished mocking him, they stripped him of the purple cloak and put his own clothes back on him. Then they led him away to crucify him.

John 19:1-3

Then Pilate took Jesus and had him flogged severely. The soldiers braided a crown of thorns and put it on his head, and they clothed him in a purple robe. They came up to him again and again and said, "Hail, king of the Jews!" And they struck him repeatedly in the face.

Physical and Psychological Pain of Crucifixion

Crucifixion was a barbaric practice used by the Romans to inflict excruciating physical and psychological pain upon their victims. The Romans were notorious for their advanced military and technological skills, and their expertise in the art of crucifixion was no exception. This cruel form of execution involved tying or nailing the victim's hands and feet to a wooden cross and leaving them to die slowly over days.

The Romans had perfected this form of execution to make it as agonizing as possible. They would use dull spikes or blunt nails to ensure that the victim suffered a prolonged and painful death. Additionally, they would sometimes break the victim's legs to hasten the process of suffocation.

In addition to the physical pain, the psychological trauma inflicted upon the crucified person was immense. They would be exposed to the elements, ridiculed by onlookers, and left to die a slow and humiliating death. The Romans' mastery of crucifixion was a testament to their cruelty and their ability

to use terror as a means of control. The psychological and physical pain inflicted upon the crucified person was unimaginable. The Romans' mastery of crucifixion was a testament to their cruelty and their ability to use terror as a means of control illustrates the inhumanity humans are capable of.

Refuses the First Wine-Soaked Sponge Offered by Soldiers

Matthew 27:32-34

As they were going out, they found a man from Cyrene named Simon, whom they forced to carry his cross. They came to a place called Golgotha (which means "Place of the Skull") and offered Jesus wine mixed with gall to drink. But after tasting it, he would not drink it.

Mark 15:21-23

The soldiers forced a passerby to carry his cross, Simon of Cyrene, who was coming in from the country (he was the father of Alexander and Rufus). They brought Jesus to a place called Golgotha (which is translated, as "Place of the Skull"). They offered him wine mixed with myrrh, but he did not take it.

Luke 23:36-37

The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, and saying, "If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself!"

Roman Act of Mercy or Mockery

In all three gospels, Jesus is brought a mixture of wine and myrrh. Matthew specifically reports that "after tasting it" (geuomai – "taste" or "perceive the flavor of") Jesus refused to drink it. Mark simply states that Jesus did not drink it. Luke's version does not offer Jesus' response to the offer of sour wine. In all three cases, we are not told how the sponge was lifted to Jesus to drink. We only know he refused to drink it.

- 1) What was this wine mixture the Romans offered Jesus?
- 2) Why did Jesus refuse the wine mixture from the Roman soldier?
- 3) Was the Roman soldier acting with mercy or was this one more measure of mockery?

Luke reports the Roman soldiers (Luke 23:36) approached Jesus as he was hanging on the cross and further mocked him by offering him "sour wine." The offense was not because the wine was "sour." Sour wine was cheap wine, called in Latin posca, which was a cheap vinegar wine diluted heavily with water. It was the drink of slaves and soldiers, and the soldiers who had performed the crucifixion, who had some on hand, now used it to taunt Jesus further. It was a combination of cheap wine vinegar, honey, and mixed with herbs such as cumin, fennel seed, pennyroyal, celery seed, anise, thyme, salt, spices, and diluted with water to make it somehow tolerable. The best wine was reserved for the Roman elites.

(3)

In our culture today, alcoholic drinks are used for many purposes. Some drink alcohol to create a more pleasurable experience. Others may drink to deaden the painful moments in life. In large amounts, alcohol not only impairs judgment but can bring the person to the place of "feeling no pain." The ancients were no different from us.

Often, myrrh was mixed with posca or wine in many ancient cultures to produce pleasurable feelings and deaden the experience of physical pain. Was the mixture offered to Jesus originally prepared for the soldiers on execution duty to numb the executioner's feelings, to produce euphoria, or to deaden the pain of the crucified? I have a suspicion as to why Jesus refused the soldier's offer of wine. I will give that explanation after the blog.

As we have seen by their behavior, it is doubtful the soldier was concerned with the pain of Jesus nailed to a cross. After all, the actions of the Romans to this point were to rain down as much suffering and humiliation as possible. This was an act of continued mockery, not mercy.

Drinks the Second Wine-Soaked Sponge Offered by a Bystander

Matthew 27:45-48

Now from noon until three, darkness came over all the land. At about three o'clock Jesus shouted with a loud voice, "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?" that is, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, "This man is calling for Elijah." Immediately one of them ran and got a sponge, filled it with sour wine, put it on a stick (4), and gave it to him to drink. But the rest said, "Leave him alone! Let's see if Elijah will come to save him."

Mark 15: 35-36

When some of the bystanders heard it they said, "Listen, he is calling for Elijah!" Then someone ran, filled a sponge with sour wine, put it on a stick (5), and gave it to him to drink, saying, "Leave him alone! Let's see if Elijah will come to take him down!"

John 19: 28-30

After this Jesus, realizing that by this time everything was completed, said (to fulfill the scripture), "I am thirsty!" A jar full of sour wine was there, so they put a sponge soaked in sour wine on a branch of hyssop (6) and lifted it to his mouth. When he received the sour wine, Jesus said, "It is completed!" Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

The question remains. Why did Jesus refuse this offer of wine by the Roman soldier and later accept the second offer of wine for a person standing nearby?

Just prior to his death, Jesus said, "I am thirsty (John 19:28). Nearby was "A jar full of sour wine which prompted a "bystander" to run and find a different sponge and stick it on a "branch of hyssop" (John 19:29). Jesus receives this second offer of wine.

If he did not drink the first wine mixture offered because he wanted to endure the suffering of crucifixion for the benefit of mankind, then why would he accept the second offer? Wouldn't the same justification for refusing the first wine still apply? It is my position Jesus did not refuse the first mixture because it was wine or had a painkiller in it such as myrrh or gall. Jesus received one and rejected the other because there was a difference between the two sponges. In addition, Jesus perceived the difference between the intentions of the Roman soldier and the innocent bystander.

The first offer was at the hands of the mocking soldiers. The second offer of wine was from a "bystander" who ran and brought back a different sponge soaked in wine. This time we are told by Matthew and Mark that the sponge was stuck on a stick (reed). John specifies the reed or stick was made from a "hyssop." Why does John provide specific details about what (hyssop) the second sponge was attached to? John was an up-close eyewitness to the crucifixion of Jesus whereas the other gospel writers are retelling the events of the crucifixion.

"Now there stood by the cross of Jesus his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Cleophas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus, therefore, saw his mother, and the disciple standing by, whom he loved, he saith unto his mother, Woman, behold thy son! Then saith he to the disciple, Behold thy mother! And from that hour that disciple took her unto his own home." John 19:25-27 KJV

John may have referenced "hyssop" to make the theological connection between the shedding of Jesus' blood during Passover with the lamb's blood on the doorposts of the Hebrew homes on the night of Passover. In Exodus the blood was applied using a cluster hyssop (Exodus 12:22). In John chapter one

verse twenty-nine John begins his gospel by informing the readers that Jesus is the "lamb of God" that takes away the sins of the world.

To shed some light on the question of why Jesus refused the first offer of wine by the Roman soldier we must turn to Roman hygienic practices and the use of a "sponge on a stick" which in Latin is called a "Xylospogium" (7).

In Jesus' day, toilet paper had not been invented. The Romans were masters at building cities and bathhouses. Connected to these bathhouses were latrines. Roman soldiers were outfitted with military gear and personal amenities such as the "sponge on a stick," the Xylospogium. I will forgo the graphic details and say that Jesus refused the first offer of wine by the Roman soldier we must turn to Roman hygienic practices and the use of a "sponge on a stick" which in Latin is called a "Xylospogium" This would have added insult to injury and continued the mockery of the crucifixion of Jesus. Quite disgusting when you think about this additional measure of humiliation.

Conclusion

Why did Jesus refuse the first sponge of wine and accept the second sponge of wine? In short, it was never about the wine. It was about the sponge! The first wine-soaked sponge was offered by a Roman soldier continuing to humiliate Jesus of Nazareth, "King of the Jews." Continuing with their taunts, jeers, and insults, the Roman execution team added one more insult to injury. The wine-soaked sponge on a stick the soldier offered Jesus was one used in the latrine to wipe a backside. It was his version of our "toilet paper" in the first century.

The first sponge was an act of humiliation. The second sponge and act of mercy.

The second sponge was a regular sponge that a "bystander" "one of them that stood by," knew the whereabouts and he retrieved it and "ran" back to the cross of Jesus. Stuck the sponge on a reed or hyssop (John's gospel), then saturated it in the wine mixture and held it up to Jesus' lips to quench his parched lips and possibly soothe his pain. Jesus accepted this wine-soaked sponge. Why because it did not have the taste of defecation.

References

Footnotes

1 Summary of the footnotes from the NET for Matthew 27:27-31, Mark 15:16-20, and John 19:1-3.

2 Summary of the footnotes from the NET for Matthew 27:32-34, Mark 15:21-23, and Luke 23:36-37.

3 Dalby, Andrew (2010). *Tastes of Byzantium: The Cuisine of a Legendary Empire*, I.B. Tauris, 2010, pp. 25 and 90-91, citing Aetius, *Medicine* 3.81, and Paul of Aegina, *Medical Epitome* 7.5.10.

4 Greek kal'-am-os, meaning "a reed, reed-staff, or measuring rod"

5 Greek kal'-am-os, meaning "a reed, reed-staff, or measuring rod"

6 Footnote 86 taken from the NET Bible on John 19:29 "Hyssop was a small aromatic bush; Hyssop

7 There are several references to support the notion that a Xylospogium was used at the crucifixion of Jesus. Here are a few of the better sources.