

Shayla: I believe that Jesus died of asphyxiation. Do you agree?

Meforshim:

I would like to express my appreciation for your willingness to approach the subject of the death of the Christ and its importance within the context of world history. Today's culture has come close to making such topics deplorably taboo. This is unfortunate since Christianity has obviously had a tremendous impact on the world scene.

I'm interested in your comment that Jesus did not likely die of blood loss, but rather probably died of asphyxiation. Setting the doctrinal issues aside, that is a remarkably sweeping statement considering the scourging Jesus underwent (by a cat of nine tails) before He even went to the cross! The blood loss and shock of that event alone should have killed Him. In fact, if you will review the events leading up to the Master's death, you will find a sorry list of human atrocities. Jesus was:

1. beaten by members of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish High Council.
2. flogged ("scourged") with a Roman *flagrum*, similar to a "cat-o-nine tails". It had three "tails", each with a little metal dumbbell-shaped attachment that digs into the flesh. It was considered so cruel that it was illegal to flog a Roman citizen.
3. beaten with wooden reeds (like "caning").
4. slapped and punched by a group of Roman soldiers.
5. crowned by having a cap or thorns pressed onto His head. Middle Eastern crowns of the period were *not* little circles like a British or French crown. They were like the mitre worn by Roman Catholic bishops.
6. tied to the crossbeam that was attached to the vertical post. Crossbeams typically weighed about 40 pounds (20 kg). Jesus had to carry that beam up a hill to the crucifixion site. Jesus was a carpenter when there were no power tools. He had previously demonstrated tremendous strength when overturning heavy desk/safes in the temple. However, on the day of His crucifixion He was already so weakened by blood loss that He fell several times and the soldiers had to force a bypasser, Simon of Cyrene, to carry the beam.
7. untied upon His arrival at Golgotha and was then nailed to the cross. The nails were put through His wrists not His palms, as commonly depicted by artists. The number of veins and arteries running through the wrist are tremendous. One foot was put on top of the other and a nail was driven through both of them.
8. left on the Cross for hours before He finally died. Soldiers came to break the legs of the victims, to bring on death but found it unnecessary to administer this last cruelty to Christ as He was already dead.
9. stabbed in the side with a Roman *lancia*.

Please consider the blood and water that exited Jesus' side when it was pierced by the Roman soldier's spear.¹ The water was likely serous pleural and pericardial fluid. Perhaps in the setting of hypovolemia and impending acute heart failure, pleural and pericardial effusions may have developed and would have added to the volume of apparent water. The blood, in contrast, may have originated from the right atrium or the right ventricle or perhaps from a hemopericardium.

The fact that Jesus cried out in a loud voice and then bowed his head and died suggests the possibility of a catastrophic terminal event. It also makes it highly unlikely that He died of asphyxiation. In the setting of the scourging and crucifixions with associated hypovolemia, hyperemia, and perhaps an altered coagulable state, friable non-infective thrombotic vegetations could have formed on the aortic or mitral valve. These then could have dislodged and embolized into the coronary circulation and thereby produced an acute transmural myocardial infarction. This has been reported to develop under similar acute traumatic conditions.

Jesus' death after only three to six hours on the cross surprised even Pontius Pilate who demanded confirmation.² His death was sudden and catastrophic. This does not seem to describe death by slow asphyxiation.

¹ John 19:35

² Mark 15:44