

CRUCIFIXION IN THE ANCIENT WORLD:
A RESPONSE TO L.L. WELBORN

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I. *Introduction*

There is a wide gulf between twenty-first century North American society and the culture in which Paul lived. In the modern world, there has been a push to foster a respect for life and the rights of the individual, which would encompass protecting them from torture. This, however, was not the case during the Roman Empire, which preyed on the fear of imperial punishment embedded within those living in the first century AD. Arguably the cruellest and most feared form of punishment was that of crucifixion. It is difficult for modern scholars to understand the dread that this symbol of Roman power invoked, and the shame and humiliation that was associated with it.

This paper will begin with a discussion of the nature of crucifixion within the ancient world and how it was utilized by the Romans as a form of capital punishment and a means to ultimately disgrace the victim. However, in addition to shaming and killing the victim, the use of the cross as a means of punishment was also a political tool and a symbol used by the Romans to maintain fear and to exert control over subjected provinces. This will be followed by an evaluation of Welborn's work and his attempt to interpret 1 Corinthians 1 in light of the comic-philosophic tradition. This paper concludes by stating that the optimal means of interpreting Paul's phrase "the word of the cross is foolishness" is not in terms of the ancient mime, but in relationship to the nature of the cross and its incomprehensibility as a religious symbol in light of its use within the Roman Empire and the shame and humiliation that it was designed to invoke.

2. Crucifixion in the Ancient World

At its height, the Roman Empire was a vast civilization which exerted its influence over a number of conquered nations. Due to the fact that the Roman Empire was so expansive, it was difficult to ensure order and maintain compliance by the different regions. As a result, the Roman elite adopted a lethal form of punishment that was so cruel that it was feared by all people.

Although the Romans were not the first to practice the punishment of crucifixion, which was developed by the Carthaginians and utilized by the Persians and Alexander the Great, they are the ones who made it most well-known.¹ It is generally agreed that crucifixion was a degrading and disgusting matter and, as a result, mention of it was frowned upon and discouraged in the works of a number of cultured writers. It was considered poor form among the elites to discuss such a base concept and, correspondingly, mention of crucifixion is generally absent in the writings of some of the more refined Latin writers such as: Pliny the younger, Statius, Lucretius, and, for the most part, Virgil.² Cicero

¹ For some references to Persian crucifixions see Herodotus 1.128.2; 3.125.3; 3.132.2; 3.159.1; 4.43.2; 6.30.1; 7.194.1–2; Thucydides 1.110.1. For Carthaginians see Polybius 1.11.5; 1.24.6; 1.79.4–5. For references to other nationalities, such as Scythians, Celts, Germani, and Thrace, who utilized crucifixion as a form of punishment, see L.L. Welborn, *Paul, the Fool of Christ: A Study of 1 Corinthians 1–4 in the Comic-Philosophic Tradition* (EEC; JSNTSup 293; New York: T&T Clark, 2005), 130 n. 87; James S. Jeffers, *The Greco-Roman World of the New Testament Era: Exploring the Background of Early Christianity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 158; Raymond E. Brown, *The Death of the Messiah: From Gethsemane to the Grave, A Passion Narratives in the Four Gospels* (ABRL; New York: Doubleday, 1994), 945–946. There is also some debate surrounding whether or not the Jewish people used crucifixion, with Ernst Bammel stating that it was used in the Jewish courts since the second century BC. Ernst Bammel, “Crucifixion as Punishment in Palestine,” in Ernst Bammel (ed.), *The Trial of Jesus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 163–165, 165. See also J. Fitzmyer, “Crucifixion in Ancient Palestine, Qumran Literature and the New Testament,” *CBQ* 40 (1978), 493–513.

In the Joseph story in Gen 40:19 there appears to be a reference to the baker being raised up and hung on a tree (ξύλον) for the birds to devour. This same event is recounted in Josephus, *Ant.* 2.77 in which Josephus states that the baker was actually crucified. Feldman critiques this by claiming that it would be anachronistic to view the baker’s death in such a manner and, although there might have been similarities to hanging on a tree, this does not indicate that it was an actual crucifixion. Louis H. Feldman, *Flavius Josephus, Judean Antiquities 1–4: Translation and Commentary* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 153.

² Hengel notes that there is an obscure reference to the cross (*crux*) in Virgil’s *Catalepton* 2a.18. Martin Hengel, *Crucifixion in the Ancient World and the Folly of the Message of the Cross* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977), 38.

summed up this position well when he stated, “the very word ‘cross’ should be far removed, not only from the Roman citizen, but from his thoughts, his eyes and his ears... The mere mention of such a thing is shameful to a Roman citizen and a free man.”³

The same is true for some of the Greek writers, such as Dio Chrysostom and Aristides, who did not find crucifixion an appealing theme.⁴ Plutarch might also fall within the category of disliking the discussion of crucifixion; however, he does recognize that “every criminal condemned to death bears his cross on his back.”⁵ In addition to this avoidance in high literature, the mention of crucifixion is also relatively absent from inscriptions, except for one Latin one which states, “may you be nailed to a cross.”⁶

This reservation is not found in every ancient author, however, as there are a number of authors, such as Apuleius, Lucian, Plautus and some of the Greek romance writers, who almost relish the discussion of crucifixion and use it as comedic relief in their stories or plays. There is also one example of crucifixion in graffiti. In 1856, a carving was found on the Palatine Hill in Rome, dating from ca. AD 225, which depicts a person nailed to a cross with the head of an ass and another person raising their right hand in worship. The inscription reads, “Alexamenos worships god” (Ἀλεξαμενὸς σέβετε θεόν). It is generally assumed that this is a caricature of Jesus and the Christian faith and that it was designed to be an insult and a source of amusement.⁷

When discussing crucifixion, the primary term that is used is σταυρόω and its cognates.⁸ However, there is another term that is often associated with crucifixion and practically considered synonymous, ἀνασκοποῖζω, which refers to impaling someone with a stake or a spear.⁹

³ Cicero, *Pro Rabirio* 5.16.

⁴ Hengel, *Crucifixion*, 77.

⁵ Plutarch, *Moralia* 554 A/B.

⁶ CIL IV 2082, for Pompeii; Hengel, *Crucifixion*, 37.

⁷ Welborn, (*Paul, The Fool of Christ*, 141) provides a replication of this graffiti and its inscription in his book. Hengel (*Crucifixion*, 19), followed by Welborn, expresses that the use of the ass’s head was a derogatory slur against the Jewish people, due to an accusation that the Jews worshiped an ass in the Temple.

⁸ The related verbs for crucifying usually involve the act of attaching the person to the upright piece of wood.

⁹ This term is often translated crucified in various sources and is interpreted that way by Hengel (*Crucifixion*, 24), who points out that Herodotus used ἀνασκοποῖζω for crucifying people who were alive, and ἀνασταυρόω for crucifying people who were already dead; however, after Herodotus these words are used synonymously. Other words that are usually associated with crucifixion are stake (σκόλοψ) and tree (ξύλον).

Beyond these two primary terms there are a number of other expressions that refer to crucifixion, such as the “infamous stake,”¹⁰ the “criminal wood,”¹¹ the “terrible cross,”¹² and the “most wretched of deaths.”¹³ These euphemistic terms give an insight into how the cross was viewed within the ancient world.

Although full crucifixion accounts are not plentiful in the ancient sources, Jesus’ being the most thorough and well known, there are a number of authors who recount crucifixions and some of the events that surrounded them, and thus allow the modern scholar some understanding and insight into this prominent feature of Roman society.¹⁴

In particular, the slave population in Italy and throughout the empire was so extensive that only through the use and fear of the *servile supplicium* could Rome maintain control.¹⁵ A good example of this can be found in Tacitus, who recalls a speech before the senate by Caius Cassius during the reign of Nero, “only by fear can you keep such scum under control.”¹⁶

On the other hand, there might be some cause to consider them as two distinct terms even after Herodotus. For instance, Plutarch (*Moralia, Can Vice Cause Unhappiness* 499D) poses the question “will you nail him to a cross, or impale him on a stake?” Although in the context of the passage both of these are similar, in that both are a cruel and degrading form of punishment, it does appear that there is some slight difference between these two terms. For the remainder of this paper, however, I will use these terms synonymously because of the similarities between these terms and to avoid confusion.

¹⁰ *Infamis stipes*, is in the *Anthologia Latina* 415.23: “The criminal, outstretched on the infamous stake, hopes for escape from his place on the cross.”

¹¹ Also called the “barren” (*infelix lignum*) in Latin. Seneca, *Epistulae morales* 101.14; Minucius Felix, *Octavius* 24.6.

¹² Plautus is particularly fond of this term *maxima mala crux*, *Captivi* 469; *Casina* 611; *Menaechmi* 66, 849; *Poenulus* 347; *Persa* 352; *Rudens* 518; *Trinummus* 598. For other examples see Hengel, *Crucifixion*, 7 n. 13.

¹³ Θανάτων τὸν σίχτιστον, Josephus, *War* 7.202–203.

¹⁴ Welborn (*Paul, The Fool of Christ*, 130) states that “the only detailed descriptions of crucifixion in antiquity are those found in the Christian gospels.” These are clearly not the only depictions of crucifixion within the ancient world, although they are no doubt the most famous. For another example of crucifixion in the ancient world, see the trial of Horatii in Livy 1.26.6 in which the steps of torture were outlined during the trial. Although these steps are not actually part of Horatii’s crucifixion, it does provide another insight into how crucifixion was enacted in the ancient world. Other recountings of crucifixion, although they are partial, also inform our understanding.

¹⁵ For information regarding the size of the slave population within the Roman Empire, see K. Hopkins, *Conquerors and Slaves: Sociological Studies in Roman History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 99–102; Hengel, *Crucifixion*, 56.

¹⁶ Tacitus, *Ann.* 14.44.3. This speech is in response to the murder of a prefect by one

It is typically assumed that a Roman citizen did not have to worry about being crucified, and that this sort of punishment was reserved for slaves and foreigners (*peregrini*). Although being a citizen did spare a person from undue punishment and grant him a trial, it is not entirely correct to say that citizens were exempt from the punishment of crucifixion.¹⁷ There are some instances in which Roman citizens were nailed to a cross, but this was only for serious crimes and high treason.¹⁸ Such a death is referred to as *summum supplicium*.¹⁹ The classic example of this was Verres, who, as the governor of Sicily, imposed this sentence on a Roman citizen, P. Gavius, for serving as a spy for Spartacus in the slave revolt.²⁰ Another example is the crucifixion of deserters by Scipio the Elder. In this example, a number of Roman citizens, who were handed over by the Carthaginians after the Second Punic War, were crucified because through their act of treason they had forfeited their citizen privileges.²¹

of his slaves and the brutal response of crucifying all four hundred of the household slaves.

¹⁷ Justinian, *Digest* 48.19.38.2: "Those who are responsible for sedition and disturbance when a mob has been excited are, according to their social standing, either hanged on the gallows (*in furcam tolluntur*) or thrown to the beasts or deported to an island." There is one noteworthy example of a person crying out that he was a Roman citizen as he was being beaten by rods and as a cross was being constructed. Cicero expresses that Verres did not even pause his punishment when the only words that proceeded from the person's mouth were, "I'm a Roman citizen." This action was seriously questioned by Cicero who held it up as an example of the state of the Roman Empire. Cicero, *Ag. Verr.* 2.5.62–63.

There is one account of a person who, after he had been condemned to crucifixion, cried out in desperation that he was a Roman citizen, however, because of this lie he was placed on a particularly high cross that was painted white. Suetonius, *Galba* 9.2.

¹⁸ Hengel, *Crucifixion*, 39.

¹⁹ In general, this sentence was hardly imposed on Roman citizens, although Romans who did commit major crimes against the state often ended up dead, or committed suicide, an honourable death in the Roman Empire. In fact, suicide and other forms of honourable death were much more beneficial than being crucified. Hengel notes that a Roman citizen, if given the death sentence, was left some freedom to determine the manner in which he would die. Hengel, *Crucifixion*, 43. For an interesting discussion on suicide and whether the perpetrator should be given a proper burial, see Seneca the Elder, *Controversiae* 8.4.

²⁰ Cicero, *Ag. Verr.* 2.5.158–165. P. Gavius was faced towards the mother country due to the nature of the charge against him.

²¹ Livy 30.43.13; Valerius Maximus 2.7.12. In the Second Punic War, discipline was particularly problematic and so increasingly harsh punishments were implemented in order to maintain control over the army. Another example of this is Avidius Cassius, who crucified any soldier who took any item from the province they had just conquered.

The actual act of crucifying a person involved nailing or hanging a person to a tree or to timbers in the shape of a T, X or the common modern image of a cross.²² Seneca states that there was not uniformity in crucifixions, “Yonder I see crosses, not indeed of a single kind, but differently contrived by different peoples; some hang their victims with head toward the ground, some impale their private parts, others stretch out their arms on a fork-shaped gibbet” (LCL Basore).²³ A related question is how Jesus or other crucifixion victims were attached to the cross. Hewitt states that tying a victim to the cross was more common, although there are a number of references to the use of nails in the act of crucifixion.²⁴ The nailing of the person to the cross was considered very painful: “with limbs outstretched... they are fastened and nailed to the stake in the most bitter torment, evil food for the birds and grim pickings for the dogs.”²⁵

Regardless of the nature of the cross, or how that person was attached, after the person was raised up on the cross the crucifixion of a person continued until that person died, usually from suffocation.²⁶

This fear and dislike of the cross was expressed by Lucian in his comical discussion of the Greek letter Tau. In his work, *The Consonants at Law*, Lucian has the Greek letter Sigma bring a charge against his

Although it was within his right, it was almost considered more savagery than strictness of discipline. *Scriptores Historia Augustae, Avidius Cassius* 3.4.

²² For a brief discussion regarding the various types of crosses and the differences they have in crucifixion see Brown, *The Death of the Messiah*, 948–949. Brown (949–952) also discusses the possible methods of how Jesus was attached to the cross.

²³ Seneca, *Dial.* 6.20.3.

²⁴ J.W. Hewitt, “The Use of Nails in the Crucifixion,” *HTR* 25 (1932), 29–45, 40.

²⁵ Pseudo-Manetho, *Apotelesmatica* 4.198–200.

²⁶ There was an interesting article published in 2004 in the *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine* that evaluated the various medical positions on the possible cause of death for someone who was crucified. Among the various doctors questioned, who have also written articles on the topic, the various possible causes of death include: cardiac rupture, heart failure, hypovolaemic shock, syncope, acidosis, asphyxia, arrhythmia plus asphyxia, pulmonary embolism, voluntary surrender of life, and one physician stating that Jesus did not die on the cross. After evaluating these options, and some of the re-enactments of crucifixions, although they were not true re-enactments because the volunteers did not die, they came to the (un)conclusion that there are a variety of ways that people die on the cross. This article does, however, provide some unique insights into the modern evaluation of ancient methods of torture and proposes that in the future a collaborative effort should be made by historians, archaeologists and physicians to better understand ancient crucifixion. Matthew E. Maslen and Piers D. Mitchell, “Medical Theories on the Cause of Death in Crucifixion,” *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine* 99 (2006), 185–188.

neighbouring letter Tau, for it injures his kinfolk and mankind. Lucian closes his work with Sigma bringing this final word against Tau:

That is the way he injures mankind as far as their speech is concerned, but look at the material injury he has done them! Men weep and bewail their lot and curse Cadmus over and over for putting Tau into the alphabet, for they say that their tyrants, following his figure and imitating his build, have fashioned timbers in the same shape and crucify men upon them; and that it is from him that the sorry device gets its sorry name (*stauros*, cross). For all this do you not think that Tau deserves to die many times over? As for me, I hold that in all justice we can only punish Tau by making a T out of him (LCL Harmon).²⁷

Although this is a humorous and fanciful court scene, the fear behind the cross and being crucified was very real, no doubt because it was designed to be a very painful and humiliating process.

What was discussed above is merely the act of crucifixion; the entire process was much more involved and degrading. The whole process of crucifixion was designed to humiliate the victim and maximize the amount of shame and suffering that person incurred. Regardless of whether the person was still living or dead, this type of public exposure striped the victim of their last vestiges of honour, leaving them entirely shamed.²⁸

In the ancient sources, one thing that is associated with crucifixion and punishment of crimes is a torture list. Crucifixion did not occur by itself, but was accompanied by a number of other physical and emotional punishments that compounded the shame and pain. Within the ancient sources there are a number of torture lists which outline the various punishments that could be meted out to a criminal once a person was condemned to be crucified. Philo describes how people were arrested, scourged, tortured and then crucified because they grieved at the horrendous acts of Flaccus.²⁹ Seneca lists a number of tortures that were implemented by the Romans that caused incredible fear within the populous. He mentions the rack, the hook, being completely impaled by a stake, people being torn apart by chariots, being

²⁷ Lucian, *Iudicium vocalium* 12.

²⁸ Jerome H. Neyrey, "Despising the Shame of the Cross: Honor and Shame in the Johannine Passion Narrative," *Semeia* 68 (1994), 113–115. See also Peter J. Scaer, *The Lukan Passion and the Praiseworthy Death* (NTM 10; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2005), 1–2.

²⁹ Philo, *In Flaccum* 72.

clothed in inflammable materials, and the cross.³⁰ In addition to these, there is also mention of blinding of the eyes and scourging of both the back and front.³¹ Although a number of these tortures were also means of execution, the Romans also combined them to increase the person's suffering and to increase fear within the populous.

Although the beatings, floggings and other tortuous acts were cruel, Sallust suggests that real cruelty would be to flog but not torture the victim before the crucifixion. "The usual mutilation was not inflicted, since the victim was to suffer a long time."³² By not torturing the victim, the person would remain on the cross for an extended period of time, thus magnifying the pain, suffering and humiliation. On the other hand, all of the torture that Jesus received might have been considered a favour or merciful so that he would not have to suffer as long on the cross. This could be one of the reasons why Jesus died so quickly on the cross.

As mentioned above, one of the key goals of crucifixion was the humiliation of the person and one of these methods revolves around sexual humiliation and assault. During crucifixion the victim would be stripped of his or her clothing and be hung up for all to see.³³ This forced nakedness would be very shaming in Roman culture and there is no good reason to assume that Jesus, in his crucifixion, would not have been naked as well.³⁴ If the idea was to shame the victim, full nakedness, especially within the Jewish context and their scruples against public nakedness, would be part of the humiliation process.³⁵ This aspect would only be compounded as people would begin to lose control of their body, defecating themselves³⁶ and even having the bloating of the penis and spontaneous erections.³⁷ Depending on the

³⁰ Seneca, *Epistulae morales* 15.5–6. Seneca's *De Ira* 3.3.6 is a particularly detailed torture list that provides some good insight.

³¹ Josephus, *War* 3.321; 5.449–451; Livy 22.13.19; 28.37.3.

³² Sallust, *Historiae* fr. 3.9; Hengel, *Crucifixion*, 40–41 n. 5.

³³ Diodorus Siculus 33.15.1.

³⁴ For a number of reasons that support the idea that Jesus would have been naked, see Brown, *The Death of the Messiah*, 952–953. It was also Roman custom to strip the victim before whipping them. This might have been the case for Jesus as well.

³⁵ D. Tombs, "Crucifixion, State Terror, and Sexual Abuse," *USRQ* 53 (1999), 102–103.

³⁶ Neyrey, "Despising the Shame of the Cross," 113.

³⁷ Neyrey, "Despising the Shame of the Cross," 114. For an interesting discussion regarding the artistic depiction of genitalia in crucifixion victims see Leo Steinberg, *The Sexuality of Jesus in Renaissance Art and Modern Oblivion* (New York: Pantheon, 1983), 82–108.

position of the person being crucified, the display of the genitals could have been especially emphasized.³⁸

Both Josephus and Seneca mention the creativity of the Romans when it came to crucifixion, with Seneca stating that the sexual violence was taken to the extreme of impaling the victim through their private parts.³⁹ There is no evidence that this happened to Jesus, but these accounts are telling in that they express a very sexualized aspect to the crucifixion.

One of the most disturbing developments in David Tombs' article is the real possibility of Roman soldiers sexually assaulting crucifixion victims in order to increase the person's shame and humiliation. Tombs states,

Based on what the Gospel texts themselves indicate, the sexual element in the abuse is unavoidable. An adult man was stripped naked for flogging, then dressed in an insulting way to be mocked, struck and spat at by a multitude of soldiers before being stripped again and re clothed for his journey... only to be stripped again and displayed to die whilst naked to a mocking crowd. When the textual presentation is stated like this, the sexual element of the abuse becomes clear...⁴⁰

This is very disturbing and distasteful for the modern reader, but within the Roman culture, convicted persons, who were not Roman citizens, were not protected and lost complete control over their bodies and their ability to defend themselves. Consequently, the soldiers could impose any form of humiliation on the person as they desired. Some might be more innocent, as in the dressing up of Jesus as a king,⁴¹ but others might not be. As a result, the exploitation of sexually vulnerable people by Roman soldiers was an intricate component in the humiliation of the victim.

In addition to individual crucifixions, the use of crucifixion was also employed en masse as punishment. Besides providing a painful execution, the Romans used crucifixion as a powerful image. There are episodes such as the revolt at Spartacus, in which 6,000 captives

³⁸ Tombs, "Crucifixion, State Terror, and Sexual Abuse," 101.

³⁹ Josephus, *War* 5.452; Seneca, *Dial.* 6.20.3.

⁴⁰ Tombs, "Crucifixion, State Terror, and Sexual Abuse," 104.

⁴¹ There is an interesting parallel found within Lucian in which a person of high standing is draped in a purple robe and has a crown and is being waited on, but will later be betrayed by one of his servants and will be crucified. Lucian, *Charon* 14. Although there is no direct tie to Jesus, there are some interesting parallels that one could draw.

were crucified along the Via Appia from Capua to Rome.⁴² The bodies were left on the cross and were allowed to rot, providing a powerful image of the suffering and degradation that awaited those who dared to challenge Roman authority.⁴³ Another example of this is related by Josephus and his recounting of some of the tactics employed by the Romans during the Jewish revolt:

... They were accordingly scourged and subjected to torture of every description, before being killed, and then crucified opposite the walls.⁴⁵⁰ Titus indeed commiserated their fate, five hundred or sometimes more being captured daily; on the other hand, he recognized the risk of dismissing prisoners of war, and that the custody of such numbers would amount to the imprisonment of their custodians. But his main reason for not stopping the crucifixions was the hope that the spectacle might perhaps induce the Jews to surrender, for fear that continued resistance would involve them in a similar fate (LCL Thackeray).⁴⁴

It was the hope of the Romans that horrifying cruelty of crucifixion might act as a deterrent, or “state terror policy,” against those who might think to undermine Roman rule.⁴⁵

This, however, did not always accomplish its goal, as can be seen by the number of revolts within the Roman Empire. In order to punish the revolters, crucifixion was imposed on the captives. For instance, in some of the slave revolts, hundreds and even up to six thousand slaves were crucified as punishment for their rebellion.⁴⁶ The same is true for provincial rebellions, as can be seen in a number of the records

⁴² Appian, *Bell. Civ.* 1.120.

⁴³ Valerie M. Hope, “Contempt and Respect: The Treatment of the Corpse in Ancient Rome,” in Valerie M. Hope and Eireann Marshall (eds.), *Death and Disease in the Ancient City* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 104–127, 112.

Another example of how crucifixion was used to create fear in the slave population is when Alexander Severus crucified the slaves who rebelled against him “on the street which his slaves used most frequently on the way to the imperial palace.” *Scriptores Historiae Augustae, Alexander Severus* 23.8.

⁴⁴ Josephus, *War* 5.449–450.

⁴⁵ Tombs, “Crucifixion, State Terror, and Sexual Abuse,” 92. Tombs’ terminology of “state terror policy” captures the intended use of crucifixion by the Romans. If the Romans could make people fear the cross, then they could have control over the people. Richard Horsley states that “Roman warlords used crucifixion as an instrument to terrorize subject peoples into submission into imperial rule.” Richard Horsley, “Introduction,” in R.A. Horsley (ed.), *Paul and Empire: Religion and Power in Roman Imperial Society* (Philadelphia: Trinity, 1997), 10.

⁴⁶ For the use of crucifixion as a punishment for rebellious slaves, see Cicero, *Ag. Verr.* 2.5.3; Livy 22.33.2; 33.36.3; Appian, *Bell. Civ.* 1.119–120; Valerius Maximus 6.3.5; Orosius, *Historiae* 5.9.4; Tacitus, *Ann.* 2.32.2; 5.60.1.

regarding the Jewish people and their uprisings. Josephus recalls that in 4 BC Varus, who was the governor of Syria at the time, put down an upheaval against Herod's son Archelaus by crucifying two thousand of the movement's leaders.⁴⁷ According to Roman law, rebellious subjects were not enemies, but bandits.⁴⁸ Likewise, Josephus recounts how Felix set out to clear the Judean countryside of "bandits," with the number of people who were crucified being too many to count.⁴⁹ These are just two examples, but the pattern of firmly putting down rebellions through the use of harsh methods is maintained throughout Roman history.⁵⁰ Again, crucifixion was a deterrent for further revolts and rebellions against the Empire.⁵¹

The use of crucifixion within the ancient world was practically ubiquitous, and certainly a common feature within Roman society. Not only was it used as a personally humiliating and degrading punishment, it was also utilized politically to create fear within the Empire and in order to maintain order. If order was broken, then swift and harsh methods for regaining dominance were employed. Crucifixion expressed Rome's might and the consequences for disobedience. With this in mind, I now turn to Paul's use of the cross and crucifixion within 1 Corinthians 1.

3. *A Response to Welborn*

Published in 2005, Welborn's book, *Paul, the Fool of Christ*, attempts to view 1 Corinthians 1–4 in light of the comic-philosophic tradition.⁵² By viewing the term *μωρία* as "designating the attitude and behaviour of a particular social type, the lower class moron," Welborn posits that 1 Corinthians 1–4 should be understood as Paul adopting the role of the fool and mime.⁵³ Welborn continues by stating that the adoption of the

⁴⁷ Josephus, *War* 2.75.

⁴⁸ Hengel, *Crucifixion*, 47.

⁴⁹ Josephus, *War* 2.253.

⁵⁰ For other examples of Rome's use of crucifixion as a punishment for rebellion against the Jewish people, see Josephus, *War* 2.117–118, 167, 241, 259–263, 305–308; *Ant.* 17.354–355; 18.1–10, 26–27.

⁵¹ Hengel, *Crucifixion*, 54.

⁵² For full bibliographic information, see n. 1. For my review of this work see the *Journal of Greco-Roman Christianity and Judaism* 3 (2006), R89–R91.

⁵³ Welborn, *Paul, the Fool of Christ*, 1.

mime/buffoon character Paul presents the cross of Christ as humorous in light of the comedic plays that were prominent at this time.

Although there are some valuable insights that Welborn's work brings to the understanding of the comedic tradition of utilizing the cross as an object of entertainment, as well as to some of the interpretations of 1 Corinthians 4, there are some problems with Welborn's argument. These include his understanding of the education Paul would have received, and some of the assumptions that Welborn makes concerning Paul's adoption of ancient plays to communicate with his audience. In addition to this, when evaluating 1 Corinthians 1, the question is raised whether understanding the cross in light of the comedic tradition provides the best hermeneutical approach for this passage, versus understanding "the word of the cross is foolishness" in terms of its incomprehensibility for those in the ancient world.

One of the key features of Welborn's argument is that Paul was familiar with the mime in its literary form due to his Tarsian education and that he explicitly used specific mimes, such as Sophron and Catullus, in the development of his letters.⁵⁴ This, however, encompasses a number of assumptions of the Greek educational system and Paul's educational training.

First, Welborn does not develop his understanding of the educational system within the ancient world. It is not clear by the historical records the age at which these works of mime would have been taught, although it has been suggested that it would have been later in the student's education. Would Paul have been attending a Greek school at this point in his development?⁵⁵ Paul himself mentions that, although he was born in Tarsus, he studied under Gamaliel, which would have placed him in a Jewish school in Jerusalem about the age of thirteen.⁵⁶ If this is the case, would Paul have been exposed to some of the higher Greek literature? In his article in this volume, Pitts suggest that the literature aspect of a person's education would have commenced fairly early in the education system and that it was probable that Paul would have been exposed to the great pieces of ancient literature.⁵⁷ This does

⁵⁴ Welborn, *Paul, the Fool of Christ*, 9–10.

⁵⁵ Porter suggests that "it is doubtful that Paul progressed very far in (the Greco-Roman) educational system." Stanley E. Porter, *Paul in Acts* (LPS; Peabody: Hendrickson, 1999), 104.

⁵⁶ Acts 22:3.

⁵⁷ Andrew W. Pitts, "Hellenistic Schools in Jerusalem and Paul's Rhetorical Education."

not state, however, how familiar Paul would have been with them or with those authors who were lesser known.

Even more problematic is the assumption that there would have been a unified educational system within the ancient world. Welborn makes reference to Statius, who mentions that the mimes of Sophron were read by students in the schools of the first century AD; however, this does not take into account the fact that there was no regimented school curriculum.⁵⁸ This is a major issue when attempting to determine what ancient authors a person or student would have been exposed to in their education process. By assuming that Paul not only had access to these mimes, but was also educated in them, places Welborn on unsteady footing and gives him a false sense of confidence regarding his understanding of Pauline influences.

As a result, far too much of Welborn's argument is based on the assumption that Paul knew Sophron and Catullus and intentionally used them in his letters to the Corinthians.⁵⁹ Welborn speculates that Paul would have used Catullus's *Laureolus*, one of the more popular mimes of the day, as a blueprint for 1 Corinthians 4. Part of the problem of this is the fact that we do not have a copy of the mime to compare to Paul's letters, but only partial references allow us to reconstruct the plot.⁶⁰

Welborn attempts to show that Paul was familiar with the theatre scene because of his occupation. Disagreeing with the gloss "tent-maker" for σκηνοποιός in Acts 18:3, Welborn adopts the term "maker of stage properties."⁶¹ In support of this Welborn cites the third edition of Danker's *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, which states that it is probable that Luke's audience might have interpreted this as prop maker.⁶² There are some questions, however, regarding this interpretation. First, there is only one other instance of this term in all of the extant manuscripts.⁶³ Admittedly, Pollux does use it as a synonym for someone who works with stage props, but is this enough to bypass

⁵⁸ Statius, *Silv.* 5.3.158.

⁵⁹ Welborn, *Paul, the Fool of Christ*, 56–57.

⁶⁰ These references are found in Josephus, *Ant.* 19.94; Martial, *De spect.* 7; Juvenal, *Satire* 8.187–188 and Suetonius, *Calig.* 57.

⁶¹ Welborn, *Paul, the Fool of Christ*, 11.

⁶² W. Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (3rd ed.; rev. and ed. F.W. Danker; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 928–929.

⁶³ Although not exact, there are a small number of instances that include cognates of both σκηνή and ποιέω, e.g. Polybius 14.1.7; Diodorus Siculus 3.27.4.

the inherent lexical understanding of one who makes tents,⁶⁴ especially since Pollux does not write until later in the second century AD?

It is also interesting that in the second edition of *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* Danker does not form a conclusion regarding the proper gloss of the term, expressing that the lack of sources “preclude[s] certainty beyond the denotation *tentmaker*.”⁶⁵ This is not to imply that Danker could not change his understanding of a word; however, there are no additional texts that might have prompted this change. Overall, the understanding of this word is uncertain and could be either “tentmaker” or “maker of stage properties.” In this case, the issue with Welborn’s work is that it places too much stock in his interpretation of this word, which is highly debatable.⁶⁶

When applying his interpretation to Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians, there are some helpful insights that Welborn’s book brings to the interpretation of 1 Cor 4:9–13. By focusing on Paul’s use of the term *θέατρον*, Welborn highlights some of the other terms that are used in this passage and compares them with some of the characteristics of theatre mimes and buffoons.⁶⁷ This provides an interesting insight into how some of the ancient readers might have interpreted Paul’s statement and possibly how Paul saw himself.

In this passage, Paul begins by painting the picture of being on display for the people to see at the end of the parade, like those who are condemned to die.⁶⁸ Following this, Paul compares himself with the letter recipients stating, among other dichotomous concepts, that he was a fool for Christ, but that they were wise.

Welborn notes that actors were particularly vulnerable to corporal punishment and that they were considered within the same category as

⁶⁴ Julius Pollux, *Onom.* 7.189.

⁶⁵ W. Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (2nd ed.; rev. and ed. F.W. Danker; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 755. Emphasis his.

⁶⁶ Just before this article came out, there was an article by Todd Still regarding Paul’s tentmaking trade. Throughout this entire article, which focuses on Paul’s employment and trade, there is not one mention of Paul being a maker of stage props. Rather, Still focuses his study on the major opinions that Paul might have been a leather worker or possibly a weaver. Todd D. Still, “Did Paul Loathe Manual Labor? Revisiting the Work of Ronald F. Hock on the Apostle’s Tentmaking and Social Class,” *JBL* 125 (2006), 781–795.

⁶⁷ Welborn, *Paul, the Fool of Christ*, 50–51.

⁶⁸ For some discussion on the Roman triumphal entries, see Thomas Wiedemann, *Emperors and Gladiators* (London: Routledge, 1952), 3–5.

slaves, criminals and gladiators as lacking dignity and control over their own bodies.⁶⁹ He then discusses how fools, at the closing of the mimes, were often crucified and that this was what Paul was hinting at in his letters.⁷⁰ It is possible that actors could have been understood as part of this group, although to make that assertion, Welborn needs to solidify that concept with some further ancient evidence.

Although this might be a valid interpretation and insight into 1 Corinthians 4, Welborn's argument weakens as he treats the beginning of the letter and applies this understanding to Paul's statement in 1 Cor 1:18–25. One of the main issues in Welborn's work is that he works backward through the text and counter to the manner in which the letter would have been read. Welborn does provide some insight into 1 Corinthians 4, but he takes the understanding that he created for "fool" and attempts to interpret 1 Corinthians 1 in light of it. The problem, however, is that they are different passages with different contexts, actors and focuses.

In 1 Corinthians 4, Paul and the apostles are the key characters and are the center of attention, whereas in 1 Cor 1:18–25 it is the "word of the cross." Paul, when writing about himself, declares that he is presented as one condemned to die; however, this death is not necessarily that of crucifixion, but is left undefined.⁷¹ There were a number of other methods of death; one that was particularly popular was that of the gladiator and his death in the ring.⁷² This, however, is very different from the context of 1 Cor 1:18–25, in which the word of the cross, namely that of Jesus, not Paul, is in the focus of the text.

As Welborn attempts to bring this interpretation to 1 Cor 1:18–25, he discusses the pairing of crucifixion with humour. One of the stronger elements of this book is Welborn's exploration and outline of the use of crucifixion humour within the ancient works, particularly within the plays. Although the harsher points of crucifixion were discussed above,

⁶⁹ Welborn, *Paul, the Fool of Christ*, 56; C. Edwards, "Beware of Imitations: Theatre and the Subversion of Imperial Identity," in J. Elsner and J. Masters (eds.), *Reflections of Nero: Culture, History and Representation* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 84.

⁷⁰ Welborn, *Paul, the Fool of Christ*, 56–57.

⁷¹ 1 Cor 4:9.

⁷² There have been a number of commentaries who view Paul's statement in light of the gladiators. For the most recent, see A.C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 359. For a more complete description of the nature of being a gladiator and the constant reminder that your life was not your own, see Wiedemann, *Emperors and Gladiators*, 92–95, 102–105.

there were a few writers that used the cross and crucifixion as part of the humour in their plays, most notably Plautus.⁷³ In his comedies, there are a number of references to the cross, most of them in jest. One of the more memorable and witty examples comes from *Bacchides*, in which the untrustworthy slave Chrysalus, after sending his master on a wild goose chase, considers what will happen to him upon the return of his master. Chrysalus remarks, "I suppose he'll change my name for me, and transform me from Chrysalus (gold-bearer) to Crucisalus (cross-bearer) on the spot."⁷⁴

Another example of "gallows humour" by Plautus is in *Mostellaria*, where the slave Tranio, recognizing his imminent demise, asks the crowd "anybody here want to make some easy money? Anybody ready to be crucified in my place today? ... I am offering a talent to anyone prepared to jump on a cross..., after that he can come down and claim the money, cash on the nail."⁷⁵ These are just two examples among many, but they provide a good feel for the type of comedy that would surround the references to crucifixion within a comedy.⁷⁶

In addition to the mimes and some of the other plays, the actual torture and crucifixion of people, along with gladiator fights and beast hunts, was a source of entertainment within the ancient world.⁷⁷ Philo recalls that the torture and crucifixion of the Jews in Alexandria by Flaccus were part of the day's entertainment in which the people were victimized to music from dawn until the fourth hour. Following this, there were dancers, mimes, flute players and theatrical competitions.⁷⁸ Seneca also records the torture, crucifixion and burning of people within the arena to the amusement of the spectators.⁷⁹ Dionysius of Halicarnassus also describes the torture and crucifixion of slaves as part of an evening's dinner entertainment.⁸⁰

⁷³ G.E. Duckworth, *The Nature of Roman Comedy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1952), 288–292.

⁷⁴ Plautus, *Bacch.* 362.

⁷⁵ Plautus, *Most.* 359–364.

⁷⁶ Other examples from Plautus are *Asinaria* 314, 545–561; *Epidicus* 610–614; *Miles* 539–540, 610–614; *Persa* 855–856; *Stichus* 625–626.

⁷⁷ Wiedemann, *Emperors and Gladiators*, 56. Wiedemann discusses some of the advertisements that were found during the excavation of Pompeii, which were painted on the sides of public buildings informing the populace about some of the upcoming events that Nero had planned for the city. Neyrey, "Despising the Shame of the Cross," 114.

⁷⁸ Philo, *In Flaccum* 84–85.

⁷⁹ Seneca, *Epistulae morales* 14.5.

⁸⁰ Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Ant. Rom.* 7.69.1.

Welborn focuses on gallows humour because he sees it as a way that slaves relieved the anxiety created by the fear of the cross by trivializing the evil instrument by which the upper class maintained its dominance.⁸¹ The near crucifixions by Plautus and the escapes from punishment in his plays provide the arousal and release of fear, knowing what would have taken place had the slave been caught and punished. Welborn concludes this discussion by attempting to apply this to the “folly” of “the word of the cross” by stating, “If the crucifixion of a slave or a poor man provoked humour, for the same reasons given above, then how much more a message about the crucifixion of the anointed one of God!”⁸² Tombs responds to this idea well when he states,

Whether the spectators applauded the crucifixion or were appalled by it, they would all have understood its message and might have felt the fear that it generated. Even if some enjoyed the sadistic scene, they would inevitably witness Rome’s might and see the consequences of opposition to it.⁸³

As a result, even if the act of crucifixion was being made a mockery on stage, the underlying meaning is still embedded within the action.

The issue in his work is that Welborn is taking the gallows humour and the concept of fool that he developed in 1 Corinthians 4 and imposing it on 1 Cor 1:18–25. The real question should be; is the concept of humorous fool what is being presented by Paul in this section? If the context of the passage is taken into account it is clear that in 1 Corinthians Paul is discussing the concept of worldly wisdom versus godly wisdom. Throughout all of Paul’s letters, and even in the Gospels, there is no attempt to describe the crucifixion of Jesus as anything remotely comical. On the contrary, it is presented as it would have been understood within the ancient world, as a completely shaming event.

In his study, Welborn states that crucifixion is nowhere connected with the term folly ($\mu\omega\rho\acute{\iota}\alpha$) in any pre-Christian literature.⁸⁴ Rather, as mentioned above, there are a number of other terms with which it is usually associated. Welborn, however, does give a reference to

⁸¹ Welborn, *Paul, the Fool of Christ*, 145.

⁸² Welborn, *Paul, the Fool of Christ*, 146.

⁸³ Tombs, “Crucifixion, State Terror, and Sexual Abuse,” 94–95.

⁸⁴ Welborn, *Paul, the Fool of Christ*, 21.

Pliny, who describes the adherents to Christianity as *amentiae*, typically translated “madness.”⁸⁵

By comparing the word of the cross with the expectations of the Jews and Greeks, and the understanding of worldly wisdom, Paul’s use of the term *μωρία* is more akin to the understanding that worshipping a crucified God was inconceivably backward, rather than being a comical idea. Although Christians would be ridiculed for worshipping a crucified God, this is not the perspective that Paul presents.⁸⁶ That God could be crucified was inconceivable in the minds of the ancients. To them, a god was powerful and had honour and would never allow themselves to be subjected to crucifixion. It would have been mind-boggling to them and would have had the appearance of foolishness. Paul and the Christians were liable to be mocked and rightfully fearful of death by the Roman state, because their master Jesus, by definition of his title “Christ,” was someone who rebelled against the state, and as his followers they would have agreed with his teaching and message.⁸⁷ Likewise, “an alleged son of God who could not help himself at the time of his deepest need (Mark 15.31), and who rather required his followers to take up the cross, was hardly an attraction to the lower classes of Roman and Greek society.”⁸⁸ In fact, people were too eager to get away from the cross. Such a backward concept in the minds of the ancients could have only been incomprehensibly foolish.

4. Conclusion

There are a number of questions surrounding Welborn’s work, ranging from the nature of Greco-Roman education to the application of the mime fool to the cross and Paul. Although he does provide some insights into 1 Corinthians 4, Welborn’s arguments rely on a number of assumptions, which are problematic in supporting the conclusions that he draws. In addition to this, Welborn does not work systematically through 1 Corinthians, but rather begins with chapter four and then works his way backwards towards the beginning of the text. In doing this, Welborn reads some of the ideas that he developed for ch. 4 into

⁸⁵ Pliny, *Epistulae* 10.96.4; Welborn, *Paul, the Fool of Christ*, 21.

⁸⁶ The ridicule of Christians can be seen in the graffiti mentioned above in n. 7.

⁸⁷ Hengel, *Crucifixion*, 83.

⁸⁸ Hengel, *Crucifixion*, 61–62.

ch. 1 and, as a result, understand this passage in terms of the mime and “gallows humour.”

This paper began with a discussion regarding the nature of crucifixion within the ancient world and how it was utilized by the Romans, not only as a form of capital punishment and a means to ultimately disgrace the victim, but also as a political tool and a symbol used by the Romans to maintain fear and to exert control over the subjected provinces. It is clear from this investigation that Paul’s understanding of the cross would have been most influenced by its political nature rather than its development and use within the mime. As a result, it is the conclusion of this paper that the optimal means of interpreting Paul’s phrase “the word of the cross is foolishness” is not in terms of the ancient mime, but in relationship to the nature of the cross and its incomprehensibility as a religious symbol in light of its use within the Roman Empire and the shame and humiliation that it was designed to invoke.