Crucifixion, State Terror, and Sexual Abuse

DAVID TOMBS

The Bible is always read with a context in mind. Assumptions are made about the original social context of the text and these are most often derived—consciously or otherwise—from the current social context of the reader or critic. In recent decades the positive value of recognising these connections has been advocated by contextual theologies in Latin America and elsewhere. Although some critics have rightly cautioned against temptations to superficially equate contemporary social contexts and the biblical world, those committed to a contextual approach have maintained that, when used appropriately, a serious engagement with current social contexts can offer insights into the biblical context and hence into neglected aspects of the biblical text.

One area in which I believe that shared similarities between past and present contexts can be most usefully investigated is the political arena of state terror and the use of torture for this end. To illustrate this, I suggest that an understanding of how recent Latin American regimes used terror to create fear and promote fatalism provides a context to recognise Jesus’ crucifixion in similar terms to state terror. Furthermore, the use of sexual humiliation and violence in Latin American torture raises questions as to

1 A version of this paper was first presented under a different title at the SBL International Conference, 20 July 1998, Cracow, Poland. I am grateful to all those at the conference—and others since then—who have commented on it at different stages.

2 For one of the most sophisticated and sustained developments of a contextual hermeneutic, see C Boff, Theology and Praxis: Epistemological Foundations (trans R R Barr, Maryknoll, N Y: Orbis Books, 1987 [1978]). Boff’s approach recognises both the similarities and the differences between the contemporary Latin American context and the biblical world.
whether Jesus also suffered sexual abuse. In the light of Latin American torture practices I will argue that the Gospel accounts indicate a striking level of public sexual humiliation in the treatment of Jesus, and that even this may not disclose the full horror of Jesus’ torture before his death. Although this may be a very disturbing suggestion at first, at a theological level a God who has identified with the victims of sexual abuse can be recognised as a positive challenge for contemporary Christian understanding and response. At a pastoral level, it could help sensitize people to the experiences of those who have suffered sexual abuse and in some cases might even become a healing step for the victims themselves.

**Terror, Fear, and Fatalism**

_Twentieth-Century Latin America_

Military coups in the 1960s and 1970s installed military regimes in Brazil (1964-85) and throughout the Southern Cone of Latin America (Chile, 1973-89; Uruguay, 1973-85; and Argentina, 1976-83). During these years state-sanctioned human rights abuses including torture, assassinations, and disappearances were commonplace. Likewise, in the 1980s the authoritarian governments in Guatemala and El Salvador were involved in some of the most brutal campaigns of repression the region has known. The transition to democracy in Brazil and the Southern Cone countries and the peace treaties in El Salvador (1992) and Guatemala (1995) have prompted official investigations into human rights abuses during the repression. Published reports from these countries offer detailed documentation that make grim reading on the years of terror endured by the civilian populations.3

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Any understanding of the political and social dynamics of the countries during this time must address the widespread use of state terror to support and enforce the illegitimate power of military regimes. Terror was an effective means in enforcing brutal authoritarianism through a culture of fear. Fear "persuades" people that it is better to endure injustices fatalistically rather than to resist them. The arrest and torture of "suspects" by the police and military in Latin America cannot be adequately explained in terms of the threat they might have posed or the need to elicit information from them. Rather, they should be understood as intended to paralyse a society's willingness to resist. In addition to targeting the victims themselves, disappearances, torture, and executions were intended to terrorise a public audience.

Modern torture is usually carried out in secret. To be effective as state terror, however, it must be sufficiently public to have an effect on the population as a whole. The balance between secrecy and publicity is different in different contexts. In the Southern Cone in the 1970s secrecy was usually quite important. The disappearances and torture of alleged enemies of the state was usually a clandestine activity, but they always had a sufficiently public dimension to serve the wider political purpose. People did not just disappear in secret. There was always an audience, either casual passers-by, neighbors in nearby houses, or family and friends left behind, who were witnesses to a disappearance. By contrast, in El Salvador the emphasis between secrecy and publicity was the opposite. There was less need for secrecy and the evidence of torture was often deliberately pub-


5. The public emphasis of the Carter administration (1976–80) on human rights may have added pressure for secrecy. However, U.S. political pressure was not applied with enough force or consistency so as adequately to deter human rights abuses.

6. One of the consequences of this mixture of secrecy with publicity was that stories and reports circulated widely but people were usually afraid to speak of them publicly. As a result people had a sense of what was happening—as was intended—without knowing exactly what to believe or how to react to it. The uncertainty created by this mix of secrecy and publicity was highly effective in creating and maintaining the culture of fear. It encouraged a public silence that implicated the wider society in passive collusion with official denials that such horrors were occurring.
lie. After torture and execution bodies were usually left in the open or prominently displayed by the roadside to terrify passers-by. Whether the torture was generally secret or generally public—and whether the victims were individuals, families, or groups—the intimidation was directed at the population as a whole.

The First-Century Roman Empire

Crucifixion was more than the punishment of an individual and should be understood in the context of state terror policies in the ancient world. As acts of terror against potentially rebellious people, the Romans principally used crucifixions against slaves and other subject peoples who might challenge Roman authority. One of the clearest illustrations of the use of crucifixion to inspire terror is provided by Josephus's description

7. The Salvadoran military regime openly embraced state terror without fearing that the negative publicity would threaten U.S. support. However much the U.S. might appear to protest its means of repression (at least when they were forced to do so by public outcry over human rights), the Salvadoran military were confident that the U.S. could always be relied on for military and economic aid when it was needed.

8. Americas Watch reported that in El Salvador "[t]he victims' bodies are rarely given to relatives nor are they generally buried clandestinely, but are often displayed prominently, suggesting that the purpose of the mutilations and other tortures inflicted upon them are to intimidate and terrorize the population" (Americas Watch and American Civil Liberties Union, Report on Human Rights in El Salvador, 73). Even in El Salvador, however, the need for secrecy did not disappear. Although the bodies were openly displayed the disappearances themselves were invariably conducted in a clandestine way and state officials always denied any knowledge as to the whereabouts of the victims or the involvement of the state in human rights abuses.


11. Crucifixion was rarely used against Roman citizens and even these infrequent occasions were to punish lower classes rather than the aristocracy. On the use of crucifixion by the Romans, see the classic work by Hengel, Crucifixion. For recent treatments see R. E. Brown, Death of the Messiah (2 vols.; Anchor Bible Reference Library; New York: Doubleday, 1994), 945-52, and the exhaustive bibliography, pp. 885-87; S. D. Moore, God's Gym: Divine Male Bodies of the Bible (New York: Routledge, 1996), 4-7; and G. S. Sloyan, The Crucifixion of Jesus: History, Myth, Faith (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995).
of the treatment of those who attempted to flee Jerusalem during the siege by Titus in 70 C.E.:

Scourged and subjected before death to every torture, they were finally crucified in view of the wall. Titus indeed realised the horror of what was happening, for every day 500—sometimes even more—fell into his hands. . . . But his chief reason for not stopping the slaughter was the hope that the sight of it would perhaps induce the Jews to surrender in order to avoid the same fate. The soldiers themselves through rage and bitterness nailed up their victims in various attitudes as a grim joke, till owing to the vast numbers there was no room for the crosses, and no crosses for the bodies. (War V. 446-52)\(^\text{12}\)

To appreciate the role of terror in imperial policy it is helpful to note that although they were an occupation force, the Roman troops were not stationed throughout the province evenly and thus were unable to provide full day-to-day security for all parts. Instead, most of the relatively small force responsible for Palestine was concentrated in Caesarea, from which a contingent marched to reinforce the Roman presence in Jerusalem for the major festivals. Roman power was maintained through threat as much as through military presence. The effectiveness and security of the Roman troops in Palestine were ultimately based on the legions in Syria and—if necessary—elsewhere in the Empire. The relatively small force in Palestine was able to maintain order because it was backed by an assurance of severe reprisals if serious rebellion broke out.\(^\text{13}\) The combination of moderate presence and massive threat was usually enough to preserve the so-called "peace" of the pax Romana.\(^\text{14}\) The changing fortunes in the Jewish war reflects this strategy. Josephus suggests that it was relatively easy for the Jews to overcome the occupying Roman force at the start of the revolt. It was the inevitability of Roman retaliation and the eventual destruction of the Temple that—at least according to Josephus—should have persuaded them against the revolt.


\(^{13}\) On Jewish resistance and the political situation under the Romans, see R. A. Horsley, Jesus and the Spiral of Violence (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989).

\(^{14}\) Josephus records that when Vespasian arrived with his army in Galilee (67 C.E.) "he made a show of force to inspire terror in the enemy and give them time for second thoughts in the hope that before battle was joined they would change their minds" (see War III. 127). After the fall of Jerusalem the flogging and threatened crucifixion of a young man in front of the walls at Machareus was enough to ensure the capitulation of the fortress (War VII. 202-3).
The mass crucifixions with which the Romans responded to major incidents conveyed the message of fearful retaliation with a terrifying clarity.\textsuperscript{15} Josephus describes how in 4 B.C.E. Varus (governor of Syria) responded to the upheaval caused by the inept rule of Herod’s son Archelaus with the crucifixion of two thousand “ringleaders” of the troubles (\textit{War II}. 69-79 [75]). The census revolt when Quirinius was governor of Syria (6-7 C.E.) and Coponius procurator of Judea (6-9 C.E.) also met with widespread reprisals (\textit{War II}. 117-18, 167; \textit{Ant.} 17.354-55, 18.1-10, 26-27). Josephus also records that when Cumanus (procurator of Judea 48-52) took a number of prisoners involved in a dispute, Quadratus (governor of Syria) ordered them all crucified (\textit{War II}. 241). Likewise, when Felix (procurator of Judea, 52–60 C.E.) set out to clear the country of banditry, the number that were crucified “were too many to count” (\textit{War II}. 253). Felix’s treatment of other popular figures and their followers shows he had no mercy on those who might threaten the peace (\textit{War II}. 259-63). Felix’s successor, Festus (60–62 C.E.), presumably used similarly draconian punishment when he “killed a considerable number of bandits and captured many more” (\textit{War II}. 271). Josephus also records how in the build-up to the revolt in 66 C.E., Florus (procurator 64-66 C.E.) raided the Temple treasury and then—because of the disturbance that followed—scourged and crucified men, women and children until the day’s death toll was 3,600 (\textit{War II}. 305-8).

Individual crucifixions should be understood within this political context. Even if only one victim was crucified, the execution had more significance than the punishment of an individual victim. Crucifixion was an important way in which the dire consequences of rebellion could be kept before the public eye.\textsuperscript{16} Whether the spectators applauded the


16. Contrary to the traditional view, it is possible that the Jews themselves used crucifixion in this way. Ernst Bammel reports, “the originally non-Jewish punishment of crucifixion had been used in Palestine since the second century BC even by Jewish courts. Because it was a particularly gruesome form of execution it was used especially in political cases” (“Crucifixion as Punishment in Palestine,” in Ernst Bammel, ed., \textit{The Trial of Jesus} [Cambridge Studies in honour of C.F.D. Moule; London: Cambridge University Press, 1970], 163-65 [165]). For further discussion on whether the Jews used crucifixion, see J. Fitzmyer, “Crucifixion in Ancient Palestine, Qumran Literature and the New Testament,” \textit{Catholic Biblical Quarterly} 40 (1978): 493-513, and J. M. Baumgarten, “Hanging and Treason in Qumran
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. Individual crucifixions served to remind people of the mass crucifixions and other reprisals which the Romans were all too ready to use if their power was challenged.

There are few detailed descriptions of how crucifixion took place—the Gospels provide the fullest description in ancient literature—but the picture that emerges fits the profile of public state torture very well.\(^{17}\) The victim was tied or nailed to a wooden cross to maximise the public humiliation: a contrast of the shame of the victim with the might of imperial power. The Romans displayed the victim on a roadside or similar public place. Crucifixion was a protracted ordeal that might last a number of days, a sustained attack on the dignity of the human spirit as well as the physical body.\(^{18}\) The shame for Jews was further heightened by the belief that "anyone hung on a tree is under a curse" (Deut. 21:23), a curse that Paul refers to in relation to Jesus' crucifixion in Gal. 3:13. Displaying the shame of the "defeated" victim can be seen as the inverse of the triumphal displays in Rome, which recognised the honour and glory of the conquerors. Likewise the victim's painful procession out of the city to crucifixion would be the symbolic inverse of a triumphal procession into Rome.\(^{19}\)

To sum up so far, biblical texts can be legitimately read with the social and political situation of contemporary cultures of oppression in

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17. Analysis of how crucifixion was used in the ancient world is complicated by the close relationship between crucifixion, impalement, and the hanging of bodies (which might be carried out either before or after death). That the New Testament writers can move easily between crucifixion and hanging on a tree is shown in Gal. 3:13; Acts 5:30; 10:39.

18. During crucifixion it is likely that all control over many body functions would have failed. The following account of electric shock torture in Argentina by Néstor Eduardo Dean suggests how humiliating the consequences of this would be: "During the application of electricity, one would lose all control over one's senses, such torture provoking permanent vomiting, almost constant defecation, etc." (\textit{Nunca Más}, 39). I am grateful to my colleague Simonetta Calderini for pointing out that the same loss of bowel control often happens during public floggings in Middle East countries today.

mind. In support of this, I have offered the politics of state terror as a case study in how a process of mutual illumination between biblical text and contemporary context can occur. Although both the organisers and the targets of repression—as well as the means used to carry it out—were significantly different in first-century Palestine and twentieth-century Latin America, the power dynamics in the social relationships involved are very similar. In both cases the military regimes adopted policies of state terror and their use of torture and executions should be understood in this context.

On this basis, the Latin American torture practices of the 1970s and 1980s can provide helpful insights into neglected aspects of crucifixion in Palestine. As will be shown in the next section, the violence of Latin American regimes against dissenters often had an element of sexual abuse. In this light, a fresh look at the biblical accounts raises disturbing questions about sexual abuse in Jesus' torture and crucifixion.

**Torture, Humiliation and Sexual Abuse**

Physical force is only part of the strategy used by regimes that wish to terrorise people into fatalistic submission. Crucifixion in the Roman empire was not just about physical pain but also about public shame. Likewise, Latin American torture involved deliberate attempts to shame the victims and undermine their sense of dignity. Physical torture and assaults were often coupled with psychological humiliation in attempts to end the victim's will to resist, or even to live. It is in this context that the sexual assaults and humiliation that often formed part of the torture need to be addressed.

**Twentieth-Century Latin America**

The recent testimonies to torture in Brazil, Argentina, Chile, Central America, and elsewhere consistently report a common sexual element to torture. There is ample evidence for this, but since the reports of torture are often very disturbing, only a few representative examples need to be restated here.

20. One significant difference of context is that in Palestine the imperial power—Rome—ruled directly in Judah and by direct proxy in other parts of the territory. By contrast, in Latin America, the immediate ruling power was often the national military, but a neo-colonial power—the USA—exercised considerable indirect power through economic, political, and military influence.
In Brazil, torture by electric shock invariably included shocks to the genitals. Sometimes the so-called “Dragon’s Chair” was used and the shocks to the body were deliberately supplemented by shocks to the genitals:

The accused was obliged to sit in a chair . . . [they] began administering a series of electric shocks; at the same time, another torturer with an electric stick gave shocks between the legs and on the penis. (José Augusto Dias Pires, 24, journalist, Rio de Janeiro, 1977)

The same focus on the genitals was shown in Argentina. The preferred instrument for administering electric shocks in Argentina, la picana

21. Torture in Brazil (p. 17) describes the two following cases as typical: “Electric shocks are given by an army field telephone that has two long wires that are connected to the body, normally to the sexual organs, in addition to ears, teeth, tongue and fingers” (Augusto César Salles Galvão); “… he was tortured naked, after taking a bath, while hanging on the parrot’s perch where he received electric shocks from a magneto [small electric generator] to his genital organs and over his whole body” (José Milton Ferreira de Almeida).

22. Torture in Brazil, 19. Furthermore, special concentration on the genital areas was also shown in physical beatings: “They forced the accused to place his testicles resting on the chair; that Miranda and the rapporteur Holanda tried to hit the testicles with the palmatória [a length of thick rubber attached to a wooden paddle]” (Pedro Coutinho de Almeida, 20, student, Pernambuco, 1970), (Torture in Brazil, 23). The Brazilian report records that animals and insects (including alligators, snakes, and cockroaches) were used against both women and men in Brazilian torture and the descriptions of this give a clearly implied sexual element to this abuse. Examples include: “There was also, in his cubicle, to keep him company, a boa constrictor called ‘Miriam’…” (Leonardo Valentini) (Torture in Brazil, 21); “That, when returning to the torture room, she was placed on the floor with an alligator on her naked body…” (Dulce Chaves Pandolfi, 23, Rio 1971) (Torture in Brazil, 21); “… that despite her being pregnant at the time and her torturers being aware of it . . . the persons conducting the interrogations let dogs and snakes loose on the defendant” (Miriam de Almeida Leitão Netto, 20, journalist, Rio, 1973) (Torture in Brazil, 21); “The defendant also wants to state that, during the first phase of her interrogation, cockroaches were placed over her body, and one of them into her anus” (Lucia Maria Murat Vasconcelos, 23, student, Rio and Salvador, 1972) (Torture in Brazil, 21-22); “… they tied his testicles and dragged him across the room and then hung him from above by his testicles” (Manoel da Conceição Santos, 35, farm worker, Ceará, 1972) (Torture in Brazil, 23).

23. See, for example, the following description of torture by electric shock: “They attached wires to his head and began to torture him with electrical current. They applied the electric prod all over his body, with preference for the genital and pectoral areas” (Santos Aurelio Chaparro) (Nunca Más, 34). The following account of two men being tortured together on a bed reveals the particularly sadistic and sexual character that this treatment could take: “At the headquarters I was taken to the parilla (grill). That is, I was tied to the metal frame of a bed, electrodes were attached to my hands and feet, and they ran an electric prod all over me, with particular savagery and intensity on the genitals. [Days later] There was somebody on the ‘grill’; it sounded like Puértolas . . . They put me on the bed on top of him and when they applied the electric prod to me, he would jump too” (Antonio Horacio Miño Retamozo) (Nunca Más, 29-33 [30-31]).
(a small electrified prod), is itself highly suggestive of the sexual element in this torture.²⁴ Its use in the rape and sexual abuse of women has been well documented and at least two Argentinean male victims also witness to how this abuse eventually led to anal rape.²⁵

El Salvador provides particularly graphic and public insights into state terror because the bodies were often symbolically mutilated before they were dumped. The reports of rape and genital emasculation reflect what Daniel Santiago has called "the aesthetics of terror and the hermeneutics of death."²⁶ Santiago, a North American Catholic priest who worked for six years in the Archdiocese of San Salvador, starkly describes the morbid symbolism that was often involved:

People were not just killed by death squads in El Salvador—they were decapitated and then their heads were placed on pikes and used to dot the landscape. Men were not just disembowelled by the Salvadoran treasury police; their severed genitalia were stuffed into their mouths. Salvadoran women were not just raped by the national guard; their wombs were cut from their bodies and used to cover their faces. It was not enough to kill children; they were dragged over barbed wire until the flesh fell from their bones while parents were forced to watch. It was not enough to kill priests. The soldiers from the United States-trained Atlacatl battalion who executed six Jesuits in November 1989 blew out the brains of these priests. This was a statement about what the killers think about the valued intellect of the Jesuit.

... These are not just killers. These are artisans of terror.²⁷


²⁵. The rape of women during torture has been well documented but recorded instances of the rape of men are less frequent. The frequency with which male prisoners were subjected to some form of rape is hard to determine. It is clear, however, that rape was sometimes used to torture men as well as women. Dr. Liwsky, whose extended testimony starts the Nunca Más report, describes his treatment in detail: "Another day they took me out of my cell and, despite my [previously tortured] swollen testicles, placed me face-down again. They tied me up and raped me slowly and deliberately by introducing a metal object into my anus. They then passed an electric current through the object. I cannot describe how everything inside me felt as though it were on fire" (Dr. Norbeto Liwsky) (Nunca Más, 20-26 [24]).


²⁷. Santiago, The Harvest of Justice, 12. The Americas Watch Report 1982 (p. 69) cites a U.S. Public Health Commission of Inquiry on El Salvador in 1980 which reports that "[t]he brutality involved in the killings of health workers and patients and the accompanying torture suggests that this is a deliberate tactic aimed at striking terror into the hearts of others. Victims have been decapitated, emasculated or found with the initial 'EM,' which stands for Esquadron de la Muerte (Death Squad), in their flesh. Official forensic medical reports document these atrocities."
No doubt the treatment of victims was conditioned by the brutal
treatment that the soldiers themselves had often suffered and the dehu­
manized culture that had been created for “efficient” military
operations. In a culture where the marks of masculinity were insepara­
able from the exercise of aggressive physical power and sexual force, the
Salvadoran military were responsible for widespread sexual abuse
against men, women and children.

To conclude this brief review of the sexual aspect in torture tech­
niques in twentieth-century Latin America, two points should be
stressed. First, sexual assault and humiliation were standard practices in
state torture practices. Second, the awareness of a victim’s sexual

28. To understand the desire to humiliate sexually and emasculate in this way, Santi­
ago’s description of military training is particularly suggestive (The Harvest of Justice, 109-
10). See also Santiago’s comments on p. 15: “They [cadets] are brutalized. Often they are
raped. Deserters say that sometimes this is done by older members of the service. Some­
times the penetration is simulated with a wooden object carved to resemble a large penis. It
doesn’t matter because the effects are the same. Shamed and humiliated, the young recruits
can only reclaim their dignity through repetition. They convince themselves that what hap­
pened to them is insignificant by doing the same to others.”

The novelist Mario Vargas Llosa offers a similar picture of sexual brutality in his semi-
autobiographical novel Time of the Hero (London: Picador, 1986 [1962]). See also the account
of Peruvian military training of young conscripts in Eduardo González-Cueva, “Heroes or
Hooligans: Media Portrayals of Peruvian Youth,” NACLA 32.1 (1998), 30-35. For a wider his­
torical perspective on conquest and sexual violence in Latin America, see R. C. Trexler, Sex
and Conquest: Gendered Violence, Political Order, and the European Conquest of the Americas
(Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995). The influence of machista cultural values that can reinforce
the militaristic drive to conquer and subdue should also be recognised. For an overview of
machismo values and their influence, see A. Mirandé, Hombres y Machos: Masculinity and
Latino Culture (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1997).

29. In addition to Truth Commission, From Madness to Hope, see also Latin America
(London: Latin America Bureau, 1977); Americas Watch and ACLU, Report on Human Rights
in El Salvador (New York: Vintage Press, 1982); Lawyers Committee for Human Rights and
Americas Watch, El Salvador’s Other Victims: The War on the Displaced (New York: Lawyers
Committee for Human Rights and Americas Watch, 1984); Amnesty International Report,
Americas Watch, Carnage Again: Preliminary Report on Violations of the Laws of War by Both
Sides in the November 1989 Offensive in El Salvador (Washington, D.C.: Americas Watch, 1989);
Americas Watch, El Salvador’s Decade of Terror: Human Rights Since the Assassination of

30. Although the analysis of torture has been based on testimonies from Latin Amer­
ica, the same conclusion would be supported in other countries. The destructive combina­
tion of racial, classist, and sexual instincts that influenced Salvadoran soldiers can be seen in
the brutal treatment of a thirty-three-year-old Haitian immigrant arrested in Brooklyn in the
station: “At least two uniformed officers are said to have tortured and humiliated a man
named Abner Louima by yanking down his trousers and driving the wooden handle of a
toilet plunger so far into his rectum it punctured his small intestine and damaged his
humiliation among a wider public was often an important part of this humiliation, although public knowledge of torture and humiliation might vary from second-hand accounts of what happened in torture centres to full public displays of how victims were treated.

The First-Century Roman Empire

Against this background, the crucifixion of Jesus may be viewed with a disturbing question in mind: to what extent did the torture and crucifixion of Jesus involve some form of sexual abuse? The testimonies from twentieth-century Latin America create hermeneutical suspicions that merit careful examination of the Gospels to see whether there is any evidence that this was the case.

To explore this question further, it is helpful to distinguish between sexual abuse that involves only sexual humiliation (such as enforced nudity, sexual mockery, and sexual insults) and sexual abuse that extends to sexual assault (which involves forced sexual contact and ranges from molestation to penetration, injury, or mutilation). I will argue that the Gospels clearly indicate that sexual humiliation was a prominent trait in the treatment of Jesus and that sexual humiliation was an important aspect of crucifixion. If this is the case, the possibility of sexual assaults against Jesus will also need to be considered. In the absence of clear evidence to decide this one way or another I will suggest that what has proved so common in recent torture practices cannot be entirely ruled out in the treatment of Jesus.31
Crucifixion in the ancient world appears to have carried a strongly sexual element and should be understood as a form of sexual abuse that involved sexual humiliation and sometimes sexual assault. Crucifixion was intended to be more than the ending of life; prior to actual death it sought to reduce the victim to something less than human in the eyes of society. Victims were crucified naked in what amounted to a ritualised form of public sexual humiliation. In a patriarchal society in which men competed against each other to display virility in terms of sexual power over others, the public display of the naked victim by the "victors" in front of onlookers and passers-by carried the message of sexual domination. The cross held up the victim for display as someone who had been—at least metaphorically—emasculated. Depending on the position in which the victim was crucified, the display of the genitals could be specially emphasised. Both Josephus and the Roman historian Seneca the Younger attest the Romans' enthusiasm for experimentation with different positions of crucifixion. Furthermore, Seneca's description suggests

assume the physical child abuse of Jesus as Son of God have been widely adopted whilst at the same time the sexual abuse of Jesus as an historical person has been completely ignored.

32. The other highest form of punishment—pitting humans against animals in the Roman circus—was an equally "dehumanising" death.


34. Samuel suggests that emasculation and sexual assault were also recognised practices at an earlier time in Israel's history. On emasculation, see 1 Sam. 18:27: "David rose and went along with his men, and killed one hundred of the Philistines; and David brought their foreskins, which were given in full number to the king, that he might become the king's son-in-law." On the fear of sexual assault, see 1 Sam. 31:4: "Then Saul said to his armor-bearer, 'Draw your sword and thrust me through with it, so that these uncircumcised may not come and thrust me through, and make sport of me.'" I am grateful to my colleague John Jarick for pointing these out to me.

35. The inscription and skeletal remains showing pierced heels discovered at Giv'at ha-Mivtar in 1968 and believed to be of a first-century victim of crucifixion have been a particular focus for discussion on how crucifixion might actually have been carried out. Hass has argued that these are consistent with the usual view that the heel bones were nailed onto the upright of the cross by a single nail (N. Hass, "Anthropological Observations on the Skeletal Remains from Giv'at ha-Mivtar," IEJ 20 (1970): 38-59. However, Y. Yadin has suggested—from both the inscription and the skeletal remains—that the soles of the feet were attached bow-legged together and then the legs were looped over the top of the cross for the victim to hang upside down; see Y. Yadin, "Epigraphy and Crucifixion," IEJ 3 (1973): 18-22. If Yadin is right, the exposure of the genitals would have been particularly pronounced.

36. Josephus, War V. 452 (see above); Seneca, To Marcia on Consolation 20.3, records: "I see crosses there, not just of one kind but fashioned in many ways: some have their victims with head down toward the ground; some impale their private parts; others stretch out their arms on their crossbeam" (cited in Hengel, Crucifixion, 25).
that the sexual violence against the victim was sometimes taken to the most brutal extreme with crosses that impaled the genitals of the victim. This practice might never have been the case in Palestine—and there is no evidence that suggests it happened to Jesus—but at the very least, it suggests the highly sexualized context of violence in which Roman crucifixions sometimes took place.\(^37\)

The sexual element in Roman practices was part of their message of terror. Anyone who opposed the Romans would not only lose their life but also be stripped of all personal honour and human dignity. It is therefore not surprising that the Gospels themselves indicate that there was a high level of sexual humiliation in the way that Jesus was flogged, insulted, and then crucified. From evidence of the ancient world it seems that flogging the victim in public whilst naked was routine. Mark, Matthew, and John all imply that this was also the case with the flogging of Jesus.\(^38\) Likewise, as noted above, crucifixion usually took place whilst the victim was naked and there is little reason to think that Jesus or other Jews would have been an exception to this.\(^39\) If the purpose were to

37. A suggestion of the sadistic sexualisation that might be involved is offered by Josephus's description of an atrocity committed by the Hasmonean Alexander Janneus (104–78 B.C.E.) after his success against his Jewish subjects who had sought foreign military assistance from Demetrius III, the Seleucid King of Syria (95–78 B.C.E.). "Eight hundred of the prisoners he impaled [crucified] in the middle of the City, then butchered their wives and children before their eyes; meanwhile cup in hand he reclined amidst his concubines and enjoyed the spectacle" (War I. 97). This event has been central to discussion on whether the Jews themselves practised crucifixion in cases of high treason (see above).

38. Although Mark 15:15; Matt. 27:26 and John 19:1 are not explicit on this (and Luke does not mention a flogging), the sequence of events they describe strongly suggests it. Mark and Matthew (who have the flogging at the end of the trial) and John (who has the flogging midway through the trial) each report that immediately after the flogging Jesus was handed over to the Roman soldiers to mock him. All three present the first act of mockery as the soldiers dressing Jesus in a crown of thorns and a purple cloak (Mark 15:17), purple robe (John 19:2) or scarlet robe (Matt. 27:28). There is no mention of needing to strip him before doing so. By contrast, both Mark 15:20 and Matt. 27:31 explicitly mention that after the mocking he is stripped of the garb and his own clothes are put back on him for the procession to Golgotha. Brown notes that the usual custom outside Palestine was for the condemned man to be paraded naked to execution but that exceptions to this in Palestine may have been a concession to Jewish scruples on public nakedness (see Brown, The Death of the Messiah, 870). It is possible that this sensitivity was especially high within the limits of the holy city.

39. This is clearest in John 19:23-24, which records that after putting Jesus on the cross the soldiers took his clothes to divide amongst themselves and that these included his undergarment for which they cast lots so as not to tear it. The Synoptic Gospels (Mark 15:24, Matt. 27:35, and Luke 23:34) are a little more vague and simply refer to the division of his clothes by lots. In a careful assessment of the evidence Raymond Brown offers cautious sup-
humiliate the victim, full nakedness would have been particularly shameful in the Jewish context. Furthermore, prior to crucifixion, Jesus was handed over to a cohort of Roman soldiers to be further humiliated (Mark 15:16-20; Matt. 27:28-31; John 19:1-5). All the Gospels apart from Luke report that the Roman soldiers mocked Jesus by placing a crown of thorns on his head (Mark 15:17; Matt. 27:29; John 19:2) and clothing him in a purple (Mark 15:17; John 19:2) or scarlet (Matt. 27:28) garment. The texts also mention that the soldiers spat at Jesus (Mark 15:19; Matt. 27:30), struck him with a reed (Mark 15:19; Matt. 27:30), and mocked him.

40. On the deliberate humiliation of enemies by genital exposure, see 2 Sam. 10:4-5 which describes how David's envoys were seized by Ha'nun and sent back with their beards half shaved and their garments cut off "in the middle at their hips." Jewish sensitivity over insulting displays of the body is also shown in a disaster that occurred during the time that Cumanus was governor (48-52 C.E.). Josephus reports that a soldier on guard on the Temple colonnade during the Feast of Unleavened Bread lifted his tunic, bent over indecently, and exposed himself to the crowds below whilst making indecent noises (War II. 223-27). Fearing a riot in the commotion that followed, Cumanus sent for heavy infantry, but this triggered a panic, and Josephus claims that 30,000 were crushed to death as they tried to escape.

41. For Mark and Matthew this happens at the end of the trial and both mention it taking place in the praetorium. For John the mockery takes place during the trial although it appears to have been done within Pilate's headquarters (18:28).

42. Luke places the mocking of Jesus rather earlier in the story at a point that is unlikely to have involved Roman soldiers. According to Luke 22:63-64, the mockery takes place prior to the trial before the Jewish elders. The mocking, beating, blindfolding, and challenges to prophesy (Luke makes no mention of spitting) were carried out by the men who were holding Jesus overnight before the trial before the Council. Presumably these were members of "the crowd" mentioned as capturing him in Luke 22:47. Mark 15:18-19 and Matt. 26:67-68 also report that Jesus was spat at, struck, and challenged to prophesy, but they put this immediately after the Council had condemned him, rather than before, and say it was carried out by members of the Council themselves. John does not mention any parallel treatment associated with the questioning by the High Priest (John 18:19-24).
with verbal taunts (calling him King: Mark 15:18; Matt. 27:29; John 19:3) and symbolic homage (kneeling before him: Mark 15:19; Matt. 27:29; John 19:2).  

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 (at least in Mark 15:20 and Matt. 27:31) and reclothed for his journey through the city—already too weak to carry his own cross—only to be stripped again (a third time) 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; the assertion is controversial only in so far as it seems startling in view of usual presentations. The sexual element to the torture is downplayed in artistic representations of the crucifixion that show Jesus wearing a loincloth. These images distance us from the biblical text, perhaps because the sexual element has been too disturbing to confront.

Although it is vital to acknowledge the sexual humiliation that is revealed in the text, however, what the texts might conceal may also be significant. There may have been a level of sexual abuse in the praetorium that none of the Gospels immediately discloses. This suspicion is prompted by the testimonies from Latin America presented earlier. Whilst the testimonies from Latin America do nothing to establish directly the historical facts of crucifixion in Palestine, they are highly suggestive for what may have happened within the closed walls of the praetorium.

Both Matthew and Mark describe Jesus as being handed over weakened and naked—already a condemned man without any recourse to

43. In addition, Matt. 27:29-30 also mentions placing the reed in Jesus’ right hand prior to striking him, and although John makes no mention of a reed, John 19:3 records Jesus being struck in the face.

44. This paper is primarily concerned with how the texts present events. The picture of abuse they present is historically very plausible but further assessment of textual historicity will not be attempted here. In view of the shame and embarrassment that would have been associated with sexual abuse, it is probable that the Gospels understate it rather than exaggerate it.

45. The privacy of the praetorium (whether Pilate’s palace or the Antonia fortress) means that the details of what transpired inside are inevitably circumstantial and would probably not have been known even at the time. Furthermore, even if it was believed that Jesus had been sexually assaulted in the praetorium, the absence of this in the Gospel accounts is hardly surprising. Apart from the distance of years and the desire to pass over a shameful event, the Gospels are usually seen as notably biased in excusing the Romans for Jesus’ trial and death.
Justice—to soldiers who took him inside the praetorium and assembled the other troops. Both Gospels explicitly state that it was the whole cohort (spear) of Roman soldiers—between six hundred and one thousand men—that was assembled together to witness and participate in the "mockery." This probably included a significant number of Syrian auxiliaries who might have viewed their Jewish neighbours with particular hostility. In view of the testimonies to gang rapes that are given by victims detained by security forces in the clandestine torture centres of Latin America this detail of overwhelming and hostile military power sounds a particularly disturbing note.

Many in the cohort would have experienced the fears and frustrations of military life in an occupied country, which could have generated an awkward inner tension of omnipotence and powerlessness. As representatives of imperial Rome the soldiers collectively exercised almost unlimited power. On the other hand, each individual soldier was at the bottom of a long chain of Roman hierarchical command and would also have felt his individual powerlessness on a daily basis. The instinctive response to such powerlessness is often to impose one's own power forcefully on those who are even less powerful. Individual soldiers had

46. Despite the attempts of the Gospels to excuse Pilate from blame, if rape did take place in the praetorium, presumably it would only have done so with Pilate's positive approval or knowing indifference. It is quite possible that Pilate deliberately handed Jesus over to be sexually assaulted by his soldiers as part of the crucifixion sentence. Such an action might have served to reinforce his own status as a triumphant lord who was able to sexually vanquish his victims through the actions of his underlings. Tresler notes that a Roman master might find it more insulting to have his slaves rape his adulterous wife's young suitor rather than to rape the youth himself (Sex and Conquest, 22). The soldier's understanding of Pilate handing over a naked victim is illustrated in the following description of gang rape in the Guatemalan REMHI report: "We found a woman. I called a soldier and told him, 'Take charge of this woman. She's a gift from the sub-lieutenant.' 'I understand, my corporal,' he told me and he called the boys and said, 'There's meat here, guys'" (cited in K. Ogle, "Guatemala's REMHI Project: Memory from Below," NACLA 32.2 [1998], 33-34 [34]).

47. Josephus suggests that, at least whilst Felix was procurator (52–60 C.E.), the majority of the Roman garrison in Caesarea were raised in Syria and they readily sided with the Syrian inhabitants of Caesarea in a civil dispute against its Jewish citizens (War II. 266-70 [268]).

48. The same psychology lies behind Santiago's comments on Salvadoran military recruits noted above and has been used elsewhere to help explain male rapes in prison. Thus A. N. Groth and H. J. Birnbaum (Men Who Rape [New York: Plenum Press, 1979], 132, cited in M. M. Fortune, Sexual Violence: The Unmentionable Sin [Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim Press, 1983]) write:

When a person feels powerless in regard to controlling his life, he can defend against the discomfort of such an experience by asserting control over someone else. In this
very little freedom or personal choice to act on this, however, and often their interactions with local people would reinforce their feelings of powerlessness and frustration. The common soldier would often have to suffer without taking immediate revenge when faced by lack of cooperation, disrespect, or barely concealed hostility. The resentment created by this situation would normally have been held in check by military discipline and the fear of military superiors who wished to avoid unnecessary trouble wherever possible. Nonetheless the aggressive urge to vengeance would remain close to the surface and could give rise to extreme violence when superiors were willing to turn a blind eye or sanction its expression on a sacrificial victim. The desire to take out the frustrations and brutalities of military life through sexual violence has given rise to atrocities throughout history.

Josephus’s account of the Siege of Jerusalem (War, V. 420-572) suggests that the comparisons between the ancient world and modern Latin American torture practices may be appropriate. Josephus’s description of how the Jewish militants inside Jerusalem tortured the civilian population in the search for food provides a graphic insight into sexual tortures at the time: “Terrible were the methods of torture they devised in their quest for food. They stuffed bitter vetch up the genital passages of their victims, and drove sharp stakes into their seats” (War, V. 435). Although the actual historicity of Josephus’s claims can hardly be taken for granted (since Josephus was writing for a Roman audience and his exaggerations and vested interest in casting the Jewish rebels in a poor light affects his testimony throughout his account), it nonetheless suggests that the sexualized tortures of twentieth-century Latin America might correspond quite closely to their first-century Mediterranean equivalents. Likewise, Plato’s description in the Gorgias of a hypothetical crucifixion (preceded by torture and castration whilst on the rack) indicates that castration might have taken place prior to crucifixion in at least some parts of the ancient world.49 Furthermore, the historian Richard Trexler has claimed

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that the anal rape of male captives was "a practice notoriously rife in the ancient world." In view of this background it is important to ask whether the fraternal and respectful kiss of greeting in the Garden of Gethsemane might have set events in motion that led to some form of sexual assault in the praetorium of Pilate.

The privacy of the praetorium makes it unrealistic to expect a definitive answer on what exactly happened inside. Nonetheless, the suspicions raised by the experiences of those who have suffered under recent Latin American regimes suggest that a question mark needs to be put against the completeness of the Gospel narratives at this point. There is a possibility that the full details of Jesus' suffering are missing from the Gospel accounts. Whereas the texts offer clear indications of sexual humiliation, the possibility of sexual assault can only be based on silence and circumstance. It should be remembered, however, that although a distinction in sexual abuse between humiliation and assault is helpful, there can also be considerable overlap between them and the two tend to go together. In sexual torture, sexual assault is a form of sexual humiliation par excellence and sexual humiliation often rests on the threat of physical or sexual assault. What form of sexual assault—if any—might actually have taken place may be impossible to determine but the possibility needs to be recognised and confronted more honestly than has happened so far. To shed light on this, further historical investigation into the treatment of condemned prisoners by Roman soldiers and the treatment of Jesus in particular is obviously required. If this is to happen, however, it is appropriate to pause and ask what positive purpose these lines of enquiry will serve.

50. Trexler, Sex and Conquest, 20. According to Trexler, "in the Ancient Greek world ... the premier sign of male dependence was to be anally or orally penetrated by another male without, at least fictively, being able to resist" (33); he continues, "Seneca ... declared that 'bad army officers and wicked tyrants are the main sources of rapes of young men'" (34). In this context even the widely held assumption that the soldiers forced Jesus to wear scarlet/purple clothing for solely political mockery might be reconsidered. Dressing a male victim in bright clothing might also have been a prelude to sexual assault (cf. Trexler, Sex and Conquest, 34).

51. This might also have implications for the question of why Judas had profound feelings of regret and repentance for his actions (Luke 22:3-5). Judas may not have anticipated the full implications of his betrayal and if the argument here is correct his despair and shame would be easy to understand.
Theological and Pastoral Perspectives

I have found the direction my research has taken me to be very disturbing and I realize that others will feel the same way. Presenting Jesus' treatment in terms of sexual humiliation and perhaps sexual assault is like uncovering a crime against human rights from nearly two thousand years ago. In a court justice system this would be far too long ago to permit or warrant criminal investigation. Some might claim that, in the same way, to raise the issues of sexual humiliation and assault in the passion narratives can serve no positive purpose and that intrusive enquiries simply add to the distress of those who wish to remember and honour the victim. I believe, however, that, for Christians today, these issues might serve constructive purposes in the theological and pastoral fields. Both our resistance and our openness to this line of enquiry might lead to insights and discoveries.

Firstly, at a theological level, confronting the possibility of sexual abuse in the passion of Christ might deepen Christian understanding of God's solidarity with the powerless. Sexual abuse is a destructive assertion of power rather than simply a result of lust. It shows the sinful impulses and degrading consequences that distorted power can generate in human society. An important element in Christian doctrine has been that Jesus confronted the power of evil and suffered death on the cross as a result. The views presented here—that Jesus was a victim of sexual abuse in the sexual humiliation he underwent and he may even have been a victim of sexual assault—are deeply distressing. They may, how-

52. Human Rights organisations in Latin America have had to justify their investigations into what many in society would prefer to have forgotten from only a few years before. On the other side victims have often struggled to keep the memory alive as means to demand the truth about what happened that might contribute to the difficult process of self-healing, serve as a warning to others and maybe bring the guilty to justice. For discussion of Latin American truth commissions and other attempts to preserve the memory of wide-scale human rights abuse in Latin America, see the collection of articles presented as "Unearthing the Memory: The Present Struggle Over the Past," in NACLA: Report on the Americas 32.2 (1998), 15-41. On the importance of la memoria for victims, see N.C. Hollander, Love in a Time of Hate: Liberation Psychology in Latin America (Rutgers, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1998). The assassination of Bishop Juan Gerardi, head of the REMHI project, on 26 April 1998 (two days after the final report was presented), shows the determination in some parts of Latin American society to ensure that the past is forgotten. The arrest of Augusto Pinochet at a London clinic on 16 October 1998 (in response to a request from a Spanish judge with a view to extradition and trial in Spain from crimes during his dictatorship in Chile) has given these debates new vigor.

53. For an example of how the analysis of torture and abuse can yield theological insights, see W. T. Cavanaugh, Torture and Eucharist: Theology, Politics and the Body of Christ (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1998) on Chile's period under Pinochet.
ever, offer insights into a fuller Christian understanding of a God who is in real solidarity with the powerless and suffers the worst evils of the world. An a priori judgment that Jesus did not and could not suffer sexual abuse may accompany an unexamined assumption that Jesus was not in fact fully human, a form of the docetic heresy which denies the real form of Jesus' physical suffering. Refusal to accept that Jesus could have been sexually abused suggests a refusal to accept Christ's full incarnation into human history. To say that Jesus could not have been vulnerable to the worst abuses of human power is to deny that he was truly human at all.

At the pastoral level, confronting the possibility of sexual abuse in the passion of Christ could provide practical help to contemporary victims of torture and sexual abuse. Recognition of sexual abuse in the treatment of Jesus could bring a liberating and healing message to the women, children, and men of Latin America and elsewhere who have also been abused. The acceptance that even Jesus may have suffered evil in this way can give new dignity and self-respect to those who continue to struggle with the stigma and other consequences of sexual abuse. A God who through Christ is to be identified with the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, and the imprisoned (Matt. 25:31-46) is also to be identified with those suffering abuse and torture in the modern world. This is the case regardless of whether Jesus was "merely" sexually humiliated in public or also assaulted in private.

Conclusion

Despite the potential pitfalls, the Latin American social context can be a fruitful starting point for insights into the Gospels. An awareness of human rights abuses in Latin America can yield important insights into the political context and full horror of Jesus' crucifixion. The role of crucifixions in the production and maintenance of state terror and the element of sexual abuse in Roman practices require further investigation. The Gospels indicate a high level of public sexual humiliation in the treatment of Jesus and the closed walls of the praetorium present a disturbing question about what else might have happened inside.