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The external examiner of Gunnar Samuelsson’s dissertation, Erkki Koskenniemi, was dramatic in his opening statement when he noted, “If he is right, then the contributions to all big lexica/encyclopedias do not agree with ancient sources and should therefore be rewritten or revised.” He then warned,

However, this is also where it gets dangerous. This book is going to be read, and it will be scrutinized very carefully. If it is graded/received well, then the respondent has made church history. But there is also an alternative. Everyone, who has studied classical philology around the same time as I, knows that there are two versions of a certain text, an older and a newer one, and that one should always take the older, “weil die neuere zu nichts taugt” (because the newer is suitable for nothing), as a German philologist once said.¹

There are strong reasons for rejecting Samuelsson’s call in this excellent monograph, which is a revision of his dissertation, to rewrite the lexical definitions of “suspension”

¹. I thank K. Appel for this translation of Erkki Koskenniemi’s opening statement at the defense on 21 May 2010, and I thank Professor Koskenniemi for making the statement available to me.
words such as σταυρὸς and ἀνασταυροῦν and to give up the claim that there was a Roman concept of crucifixion before Jesus’ time (21).

The first chapter (1–35) is a brief survey of previous investigations of crucifixion. Samuelsson defines crucifixion using four markers of the execution that he takes over from Heinz-Wolfgang Kuhn: “suspension,” “completed or intended execution,” “with or without a crossbeam,” and “an extended death struggle” (19, 29). His intention is to exclude impalement, postmortem suspension, and hanging (28–29; see also 149, 175, 197). He calls his methodology “minimalistic,” which is an attempt “to strip down the information of each text to its explicit features” (30) and not, for example, to read the form of Jesus’ death into ancient texts. Semantically, instead of using one word to understand a Greek word, Samuelsson seeks to establish a “range of meaning” of a word through its usage (32–35).

Next Samuelsson surveys Greek literature from Homer until the turn of the first century (37–150). He stops there because “Christianity and its texts were becoming influential” (37). This is a rather mysterious claim, since he includes sections on Josephus, Philo, Plutarch, Appian, and Chariton, and he often quotes texts from Lucian (see the index s.v. [343]). His conclusions are apodictic: “none of the verbs means ‘to crucify’ and none of the nouns means ‘cross’” (147). Samuelsson suggests that the vagueness of the terminology may imply that there was no defined punishment of crucifixion in the time prior to Jesus (147). For example, ἀνασταυροῦν commonly is used “with suspension of corpses, whole or in parts, and impaling” (144), while ἀνασκολοπίζειν is used primarily for the “suspension of corpses” and in some cases for “executionary, ante-mortem, suspensions” (144). The use of nails does indicate that impaling is not the punishment (145). Further, κρεμασνίκει is “almost useless as an indicator of crucifixion” (145). Samuelsson then makes the assumption that if a text does not explicitly contain all four markers mentioned by Kuhn, then almost every ancient text must be excluded. These are left: Herodotus 7.33.1, 9.120.4, 9.122.1 (προσδιαπασσαλεύειν and προσπασσαλεύειν are used), Diodorus Siculus 20.54.7 (does not use ἀνασταυροῦν or ἀνασκολοπίζειν), and the crucifixion stories in Chariton (3.4.18, 4.2.6–7, etc.). Josephus, Plutarch, and Appian are “left out. Their suspensions cannot, with any degree of probability, be labeled as crucifixions” (149–50). Whether this minimalistic (and atomistic) assumption is justified will be further discussed below. One need only consider a text such as Josephus, A.J. 13.380: ἑστιώς ἁγάρ ἐν ἀπότπει μετὰ τῶν παλλακίδων ἀνασταυρώσας προσέταξεν αὐτῶν ὡς ἀκτικοσύνης, τούς δὲ παῖδας αὐτῶν καὶ τὰς γυναῖκας ἐτὶ ζωντῶν παρὰ τὰς ἐκείνων ὄψεις ἀπέσφατε. Here it is clearly true that Alexander Jannaeus’s victims were suspended alive and that the “suspensions appear to be executions” (103). One can conclude with a high degree of probability that this text is a depiction of crucifixion. Samuelsson’s minimalistic interpretation in this example is too skeptical and renders his conclusions

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about terminology and the practice of crucifixion before the Common Era inherently questionable.

Samuelsson reviews Latin literature from “the advent of Classical language” up until the second century CE (151–207). His terminological conclusions (202) are that “crux refers to a suspension tool in a higher degree than σταυρός.” Crucifigere does not only mean “to crucify” but “to attach in some way to a vertical torture device.” “It is … difficult to uphold the notion that crux simply refers to the standing pole while patibulum refers to the crossbeam. Crux is the primary designation for a vertical suspension or torture tool. The primary designations for a carried torture device are patibulum and furca.” However, although patibulum refers “generally to a beam, preferably horizontal, often used in connection with punishments,” it only becomes “crossbeam” in Christian theology, and crux “did not mean cross before Jesus” (202). Samuelsson never proves that the verb crucifigere does not mean “crucify.” Although Plautus uses crux in a sense that is close to “cross” (†) it refers to a variety of devices (203–4; see 172 and the discussion of Most. 359–360). Given his terminological conclusions and assumption about a text having to have the four characteristics mentioned above, only one text survives Samuelsson’s sifter (206): Seneca, Dial. 1.3.9–10. Thus “there was no defined punishment called crucifixion before the execution of Jesus” (205). Several examples will indicate problems in Samuelsson’s approach. In Seneca, Ep. 101.10–14, the philosopher describes an impalement (189–191, 203), according to Samuelsson. This is not correct, however, because Seneca envisions Maecenas eking out a miserable death while suspended stretched out on a patibulum (patibulo pendere districtum) and not the immediate death that a lengthwise impalement implies. In his interpretation of the usage of patibulum, Samuelsson neglects to use the fundamental work of Paolo Gatti (Thesaurus Linguae Latinae X/1.706.48–708.30 s.v. patibulum), only mentioning its existence in a footnote (286 n. 109). This results in the following key errors. For Plautus, Carb. frag. 2 (patibulum ferat per urbem, deinde adfigatur cruci; let him/her carry the patibulum [horizontal bar] through the city, then let him/her be fastened to the crux [vertical beam, in this usage]), Samuelsson unjustifiably assumes that the patibulum might be a separate punishment (174) instead of the horizontal bar that an individual carries before being attached to the vertical pole (crux, in this case). From a later text, Firmicus Maternus, Mathesis 6.31.58 (patibulo subfixus in crucem tollitur; fastened to the patibulum, he/she is raised onto the crux [vertical beam]), it is clear that individuals were attached to crosses while tied or nailed to their patibula (e.g., Seneca, Ep. 101.12 above). This is confirmed very clearly by representations of crucifixion from the ancient world (two graffiti by pagans and one by a Christian magician) that show tau-shaped crosses (see, e.g., my “Roman Crucifixions: From the Second Punic War to Constantine,” ZNW 104 [2013]: 1–32, esp. 14 [the Pereire gem], 18 [the Palatine graffito], 23 [the Puteoli graffito]) and by the many texts that
describe individuals suspended on patibula. In his reconstruction of the lex Puteolana (Augustan era), Samuelsson argues that si in cruc(em) / patibul agere volet should be reconstructed as “if he wants to bring the slave to a cross or patibulum” [201]). This is a philological impossibility due to the fact that in classical Latin no author ever writes that an individual was taken to a patibulum. One carries a patibulum, never a crux, in classical Latin texts. Better-grounded work in the Latin terminology would provide a better understanding of σταυρός when used in texts prior to the Common Era that describe Roman executions.

Samuelsson then surveys the Old Testament and early Jewish literature (209–36) using David W. Chapman’s key monograph, Ancient Jewish and Christian Perceptions of Crucifixion (WUNT 2/224, Tübingen, 2008). His conclusions about terminology (מָלֵא [talah] and κρεμαστόν) in the Old Testament is that the words refer to “some kind of unknown form of public execution — or unknown form of suspension of corpses” (234). No “suspension accounts can be labeled crucifixions in a traditional sense” in the Old Testament (235).

His chapter on the New Testament (237–60) displays similar minimalistic conclusions. The “gospel authors offer a series of brief and more or less non-informative reports” (257), and the “texts do not reveal what carrying a σταυρός actually is” (257–258). The Gospels “do not support the carrying of a crossbeam to a waiting pole” (296). Jesus’ execution is not an impalement or hanging, and according to John nails were used (20:25 and perhaps Luke 24:39).

Samuelsson (ch. 6: 261–307) then argues against scholars who have attempted to list many characteristics that define crucifixion in the ancient world (e.g., scourging, attachment to a cross beam [patibulum], suspension and attachment to cross beam and standing pole, a sedile [294]). For Samuelsson, only these characteristics can be assumed: a public suspension, the object is a living or dead person, the victims were slaves or unfree individuals, the suspension tool could be “nearly anything,” and the victim was sometimes “scourged or otherwise tortured” before suspension (295). Most of the events that the scholars label as “crucifixions” should be relabeled as “suspensions” (296). He gives an extremely skeptical interpretation of the calcaneum transfixed by a nail (297–98) and denies that the heel bone is “proof of crucifixion.” This conclusion is a reductio ad absurdum of Samuelsson’s methodology and indicates a misunderstanding of historical probability. The Puteoli graffito, for example, depicts a woman, Alkimilla, whose two ankles are attached on either side of the vertical pole (for images, see the reference in my “Roman Crucifixions,” 23, and the original publication by Margherita Guarducci, “Iscrizioni greche e latine in una taberna a Pozzuoli,” in Acta of the Fifth International Congress of Greek and Latin Epigraphy, Cambridge 1967 [Oxford, 1971], 219–23, pl. 23b),
just as in the case of Jehohanan ben Akkol. In addition, she is seated on a small sedile (for which Samuelsson claims there is no textual evidence [295], although later Christian authors are witnesses to its existence, e.g., Tertullian, Nat. 1.12.4). Terminologically, Samuelsson (277 and 309) concludes that σταυρός means a pole placed in the ground but not a cross (†). Here Samuelsson passes over two fundamental pieces of evidence used by BDAG: Lucian, Jud. voc. 12 (which he only mentions on 278 in a reference to the lemma in LS] and which he omits in his quotation from the lemma in BGAD on 276–77) and Barn. 9:8. Both authors assume that σταυρός had a tau shape, and Artemidorus, Onir. 2.53, assumes that it is made from several pieces of wood (see “Roman Crucifixions,” 3–4, 12). With regard to the entry for ἀνασταυρόω in BDAG, “always simply crucify,” Samuelsson argues that of eighteen texts mentioned only Chariton 4.2.6 resembles crucifixion (271–72). His conclusion may be questioned, however, if one is willing to concede that a text such as Josephus, Bell. 2.306 (οὓς μάστιξιν προαικίσας ἀνεσταύρωσεν), is almost certainly a portrayal of crucifixions despite the absence of an explicit mention of all four markers defined above. The phrase σταυρῷ προσηλῶσαι in Bell. 2.308 makes it highly probable that this account is of a set of crucifixions. The word crux is “some kind of pole,” and patibulum is “a pole or a beam in a broad sense.” “It could be used as a punishment or torture tool used in connection with crux and perhaps also as an equivalent to crux” (286). Samuelsson apparently rejects (286) the OLD’s definition of crux, which is based on the sum of the evidence: “Any wooden frame on which criminals were exposed to die, a cross (sts. also, a stake for impaling).” Seneca, Dial. 7.19.3 (cf. Dial. 6.20.3), for example, includes a reference to people on cruces and further specifies it by noting that those individuals spit on their spectators from their patibula. In other words the cruces had horizontal bars.

The second edition differs from the first primarily by the addition of material in the sixth chapter with which Samuelsson challenges the characteristics of Roman crucifixion adopted by various scholars (301–7). He adds a paragraph to his original conclusion (309–13) in which he argues that “[a]bsence of proof is not proof of absence” (313, emphasis original), which means there were punishments during the period studied by Samuelsson that were crucifixions but which left no textual traces.

There are only two clear cases of impalement in Latin literature that describe Roman executions: Seneca, Ep. 14.5 (stipitem [post] used in a lengthwise impalement, and Seneca distinguishes it from crux), and Dial. 6.20.3 (Seneca includes stipes used in lengthwise impalement as a form of crux). Hanging was not a mode of execution in the Republic or the imperium and can be disregarded (see E. Cantarella, I supplizi capitali in Grecia e a Roma, Milan 1991, 185 [one among many ancient historians who have come to this conclusion]). One needs to read the Greek texts that describe Roman executions, including the Gospels, using the linguistic precision offered by the Latin texts. When the
Gospels describe Jesus (or Simon of Cyrene) carrying a σταυρός, for example, based on Roman usage they mean carrying a patibulum (since no classical author ever claims a person carried a crux). This is an old result, and there is no clear reason for rejecting it. The immediate corollary to the arguments made here is that we do have a fairly good idea of the shape of the cross on which Jesus was crucified (since it had a patibulum). The best word the ancients could find to render patibulum into Greek was σταυρός.

It is refreshing to attempt to approach each text de novo, without making grand assumptions about what ancient suspension was in Roman society, for example. However, such an approach ends up in a form of minimalism (better, “skepticism” or “atomistic interpretation” [a phrase of Koskenniemi’s]) that is inconsistent with both the nature of language (for which one needs a synchronic or diachronic approach that uses many other texts) and historical probability (that considers the entire Roman practice of crucifixion in antiquity). There is consequently no need for every text to mention all four of the markers given above. If an author indicates in a context of execution that a living individual was suspended by a Roman authority, then crucifixion is a justified inference (impalement is extremely rare textually). Samuelsson’s neglect of the graffiti (and the gem) is a crucial shortcoming that could be fairly easily rectified, but use of the images would substantially alter his conclusions. His work is not to be ignored, despite the criticisms I have made. It is a valuable contribution to the debate.