



# Saint Josemaria Escriva

Founder of Opus Dei

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## How did Jesus die?

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Jesus died, nailed to a cross, on the 14th day of Nisan, Friday April 7 in the year 30 AD. This can be deduced from a critical analysis of the Gospel accounts compared with the allusions to his death contained in the Talmud (cf. Sanhedrin 6, 1; fol. 43a).

Crucifixion was the death penalty which the Romans meted out to slaves and rebels. It was a shameful death, and so could not be used on Roman citizens, but only foreigners. From the time of the Roman occupation of Israel there is plenty of evidence that this penalty was imposed quite often. In the year 4 BC the Syrian Procurator Quintilius Varus crucified two thousand Jews in reprisal for a rebellion.

The discoveries in the necropolis of Giv'at ha-Mivtar on the outskirts of Jerusalem throw light on the way Jesus could have been crucified. What was found was the tomb of a man who had been crucified in the first half of the first century AD, so a contemporary of Jesus.

From the inscription on the tomb we know that his name was Yohanan ben Hagkol. He was 1.7 meters tall, and was about twenty-five years old at death. It is clear that he was crucified, because the people who buried him had not been able to remove the nail from one of his feet, and were obliged to bury him with the nail and a piece of wood still attached. The cross appears to have been of olive-wood, and it seems to have had a slight projection between the legs, so that the victim could support himself on it to breathe, thus prolonging the agony. (Without any support, the victim's weight would hang entirely from his arms and death would occur more rapidly by asphyxiation.)

The legs would be slightly apart and bent. The remains show no damage or breaking of the bones of the hands. This makes it likely that this man had his arms simply tied to the cross (unlike Jesus, who was nailed). The position of the long nail that traversed his foot may be taken to show that one nail was used for both

feet, in the following fashion: the legs were separated by the upright of the cross, with the right side of the left heel and the left side of the right heel against it; the nail went through one heel from side to side, then the post, and then the heel of the other foot. The torment was such that Cicero called crucifixion the “greatest punishment”, the “cruellest and most terrible punishment”, “the worst and ultimate punishment, that inflicted on slaves” (*In Verrem* II, 5, 165 and 169).

However, to get a true idea of what Jesus’ death on the cross meant, it is not enough to dwell on the tragic details illustrated by history. The deeper reality is that “Christ died for our sins, in accordance with the Scriptures” (I Cor 15:3).

His generous self-giving to death on the cross shows the greatness of God’s love for every human being. “God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us” (Rom 5:8).

**Bibliography:**

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- Nicu Haas, “Anthropological Observations on the Skeletal Remains from Giv’at ha-Mivtar”, *Israel Exploration Journal* 20 (1970): 38-59; Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth 2*, Ignatius Press, 2011.