



Conducted by
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“Matthew, Mark, Luke and John each gives a differing version of the inscription on the cross of Christ. In view of the fact that each apostle was inspired by the same Holy Spirit, how would you explain the differences?”

The Four Inscriptions

It is true that the four writers of the “gospels”, referred to above, give slightly differing renderings of the inscription placed by Pilate on Christ’s cross.

Mark’s account of the “accusation” attached to the cross is simplest (Mark 15: 26):
“The King of the Jews.”

Matthew prefixes Mark’s account by “*This is Jesus*”, thus:
“This is Jesus, The King of the Jews.”

Luke prefixes Mark's account by "This is", thus:
 "This is the King of the Jews."

John's prefix is longest of all i.e. "Jesus of Nazareth". thus:
 "Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews."

Thus the phrase "the King of the Jews" is common to all four.

It does not appear to this writer that the differences are of a serious nature; nevertheless some might insist that they ought all to have been exactly the same. We ought, therefore, to look for some explanation.

Apparently the Romans, having a bent for legal detail and tidiness, followed a practice of announcing the terms of the charge against criminals who were being executed. This announcement was made in gypsum letters on a rough board and, in the case of crucifixion, this board was hung round the neck of the culprit and later transferred to the cross. This may not have been done at every crucifixion, but it was carried out in the case of rather special prisoners and it was followed in the case of Christ's crucifixion, as we know. Pilate, we are told, personally wrote the *titulus* (John 19:19) and put it on the cross. Matthew, Mark and Luke describe it as 'his accusation' and John says it was "a title". Jesus was charged by false witnesses with many things at His trial, but in the end it was not for blasphemy or any other like crime that our Lord died, but for "treason". Pilate could not, of course, put a man to death without a cause, and this was as near as he could come to one — the claim that Jesus being a king was in Roman eyes a potential threat to Caesar. Pilate possibly did not regard Jesus as any such threat but grasped the opportunity of trumping up a convenient charge. Officially, then, Jesus died because of the fact that He was "King of the Jews" — a fact referred to more by the Jews than by Jesus Himself) and that was what was written upon His superscription on the cross. The charge was, of course, completely false: Jesus was indeed King of the Jews, but guilty of no crime — least of all that of treason.

The Three Languages

We are indebted to Luke and John for the information that the accusation was written three times — *each time in a different language*, in Hebrew, Greek and Latin. The Hebrew (i.e. Aramaic) would be understood by the Jews in Palestine, just as the Gentiles would understand the Greek and the Latin. Greek would be the prevailing language throughout the provinces and Latin was the language of the occupying forces — the Romans. Thus, all the people in and around Jerusalem could read the inscription on Christ's cross. Indeed John tells us (John 19:20) that "This title then read many of the Jews; for the place where Jesus was crucified was nigh unto the city..." John goes on (in v's 21 and 22) to tell us that "Then said the chief Priests of the Jews to Pilate, Write not the king of the Jews; but that *He said*, I am the King of the Jews. Pilate answered, What I have written I have written".

And so Pilate by the writing of a title showed at once the "official" grounds on which his consent to the death of Jesus had been wrung from him. But, at the same time, the title showed his angry contempt for these Jewish leaders. This was their "King" — poor, bleeding and being crucified; and it may be the title implied his own secret half-belief that Jesus was in some way a king, far more noble and high-souled than all the hypocritical chief priests, elders and scribes taken together. It seems obvious that Pilate thoroughly despised the Jews, and especially so when he remembered that they had been allowed to drive him to a deed which he so thoroughly hated. Thus he sent them packing when they came cringing to him about the inscription and asked him to alter it. The title, "This is the King of the Jews"

was Pilate's second-handed mode of a parting retaliation to the Jews, and yet, wittingly or unwittingly, by his refusal to change the title he proclaimed to the world (in its then three main languages) a great and eternal truth.

The Differences

Having sketched in a brief background to the question before us, what is the explanation of the differences in the rendition of the title by the four gospel writers?

The first point worthy of mention is the fact that in all probability they were not intending to give us a verbatim quotation of the actual words on the board — they probably had all personally read the actual inscription and were but paraphrasing the contents of it. All four versions are essentially the same; all state the sense of the superscription, and all state correctly the charge i.e. "The King of the Jews." Both Matthew and Luke can be excused for saying (by way of a prefix), "This is the King of the Jews" for such a thing is implied.

It may be, too, that there is substance for the point of view that as John indicates (in John 19:19) he is recording the title applied by Pilate, Pilate's title was "Jesus of Nazareth the King of the Jews".

By contrast Matthew, Mark and Luke claim only to be supplying us with information regarding the accusation against Christ. What was the accusation? "This is Jesus the King of the Jews".

Then again and probably most importantly of all is the fact that the accusation and title were written in three languages — Hebrew, Greek and Latin. Perhaps the wording differed in the three languages. Indeed it is thought that Pilate incorporated the mention of Nazareth into the Hebrew version (as quoted by John) to annoy the Jews. The Jews, of course, believed that "no good thing could come out of Nazareth" (John 1:46).

Summing Up

In a brief summing up I would list the following points:—

- (1) The differences in the four accounts are trivial and constitute prefixes which are in any case, implied;
- (2) The intention of the writers may have been merely to paraphrase the wording and not to give a straight quotation;
- (3) Only one of the writers claimed to be recording the terms of the title Pilate had written. Two of the others claimed to be giving the terms of his accusation;
- (4) The title or accusation was written in three languages, and this gives room for slight differences to occur in a retranslation. John may have quoted what the Hebrew version said, Matthew the Latin, and Luke the Greek. Who knows?

In any event it is interesting to note that, although the Jewish priests and Pilate may not have realised it, the title written by Pilate was a means by which God was pleased to proclaim to the world (in its then three main languages) the Messiahship of Jesus and the fulfilment of prophecy.

"Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews"

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From this exposition of the differing inscriptions on the cross it is reasonable to conclude that the full and correct wording was: "THIS IS JESUS OF NAZARETH, THE KING OF THE JEWS." This does not contradict the account given by either Matthew, Mark, Luke or John. EDITOR .