
“What I Have Written, I Have Written”

*“So the chief priests of the Jews were saying to Pilate, ‘Do not write, ‘The King of the Jews’; but that He said, ‘I am King of the Jews.’” Pilate answered, ‘What I have written I have written’”
(John 19:21, 22).*

When a criminal was executed in first-century Palestine, it was common to post near the person or near the place of execution the reason he was being put to death. In the case of Jesus, a sign, ordered by Pilate, was nailed on the portion of the central crossbeam that extended above Jesus’ head. In its entirety, it perhaps read, “This is Jesus the Nazarene, the King of the Jews” (see John 19:19).

John gave the fullest account of this inscription. He said that it was recorded in three languages: in Greek, Latin, and Hebrew, or Aramaic. These were the three great languages of that time and place. Latin was the official language, Greek was the universal language, and Hebrew was the Jewish language. Anyone who could read would be able to understand the reason given for Jesus’ crucifixion.

John also told us that the Jews were offended by what Pilate had written on the sign. They became so incensed by what was posted that they left the scene of the crucifixion and went to confront Pilate about it. The chief priests said to him, “Do not write, ‘The King of the Jews’; but that He said, ‘I am King of the Jews.’” Pilate had deliberately written what he had written, and he was not going to change it. He no doubt intended to rebuke the Jews with his sign because they had forced him into handing Jesus over to them. In keeping with his stubbornness and self-willed nature, he told the Jewish leaders that what he had written he had written. In other words, the sign he had ordered to be put above Jesus’ head on the cross would stay there.

All of the Gospel writers mentioned this superscription that was fastened to the cross above Jesus (Matthew 27:37; Mark 15:26; Luke 23:38; John 19:19). So far as we know, no inscription was posted above the heads of the thieves. Perhaps it was a well-known fact that the two men hanging beside Jesus were thieves, so they needed no placard to tell the reason they were being executed. Jesus, however, being the spiritual Teacher that He was, did need such an inscription. Matthew and Mark said that the title above Jesus contained the “charge” that was made against Him, or the reason for His crucifixion. Luke and John simply said that an inscription was placed above Him.

Each Gospel writer differed from the others by a word or two in recording the inscription. Matthew said, “This is Jesus the King of the Jews” (Matthew 27:37); Mark wrote, “The King of the Jews” (Mark 15:26); Luke recorded, “This is the King of the Jews” (Luke 23:38); and John wrote, “Jesus the Nazarene, the King of the Jews” (John 19:19). When each account is compared with the others, it is obvious that each writer chose to mention only a part of the superscription. The complete phrasing was “This is Jesus the Nazarene, the King of the Jews.” Perhaps the fact that the title was posted in three languages led to some of the variety that is seen in the four Gospel Accounts.

When we look at this superscription from the different viewpoints of those who participated in its creation, we are reminded of the differing views that people hold even today concerning Jesus.

Pilate's viewpoint: the view of a humanist. When he put up the inscription, Pilate was saying, "I'll post this wording to pay them back." His way was that of humanism—that is, he lived as if in the absence of God, doing everything through himself, because of himself, and for himself. Pilate placed the right message on the board above Jesus' head, but he did it for his own purposes, not God's.

The chief priests had pushed Rome's governor into a corner from which he could not escape. They forced him against his will to grant their wishes. Pilate was irked by what they had done to him, and he used this inscription to insult them publicly.

Pilate had not found the courage to take a stand in behalf of Jesus. Wishing to avoid a riot, he had been unwilling to make the right judgment concerning Jesus. He, like many people in the world, was mainly concerned about how things would turn out for himself. His interest was in his governorship, not in what was true or what was the honorable thing to do. The Jews had taken advantage of his lack of moral courage to get their way. Recoiling from his defeat at their hands, Pilate put in place an inscription that gave him the last word with those who had manipulated him.

The Jews' viewpoint: the view of the religionists. The chief priests were saying, "He is not really the King of the Jews; He only said He was the King of the Jews." Their way was the way of prejudice. They wanted religion, but they did not want truth. The inscription was too pointed and adamant for them. It said that Jesus was in fact the King of the Jews and that the Jews had brought about the crucifixion of their own King, the Messiah. The top religious leaders of the day had refused the truth and become murderers in order to continue in their religious rituals and self-made traditions!

We must realize that if we accept Jesus as King, we can no longer have our way. Jesus only reigns over those who have submitted to Him. In one sense, He issues only one invitation: He asks us to follow Him—not man-made organizations, human institutions, or financial gain. Furthermore, He makes one big promise to us: to lead us into the way of truth.

The Gospel writers' viewpoint: the view of the evangelists. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John were

saying, "This is the One whom God sent into the world to be the King of the Jews." They were telling us that, in spite of the attempts that were made to smear the name and character of Jesus so that He would be crucified for some atrocious crime, He was actually crucified for being who He said He was: "The King of the Jews." Here is the message of the Gospels. Peter said on the Day of Pentecost, "Therefore let all the house of Israel know for certain that God has made Him both Lord and Christ—this Jesus whom you crucified" (Acts 2:36). John wrote,

Therefore many other signs Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name (John 20:30, 31).

What Pilate had written on that placard was the truth about Jesus. During the trials, Pilate had asked Jesus, "Are You the King of the Jews?" Jesus had answered that He was indeed their King, but that His kingdom was "not of this world" (John 18:33, 36). Later, Pilate must have remembered this conversation with Jesus. Although he put the truth on that superscription board, he himself was not changed by it. The Gospel writers wanted us to see who Jesus really is, accept the truth about Him, and yield to His leadership for the rest of our lives.

Of course, the biggest question about the inscription above Jesus' head is this: Have we accepted the truth that Jesus is King? If so, we must allow that truth to constrain us to follow Him wherever He wants to lead us.

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When the world mocked God by crucifying as a criminal the King He had sent, God mocked the world by choosing for His Son to reign as the King from the cross where they crucified Him. "But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong, and the base things of the world and the despised God has chosen, the things that are not, so that He may nullify the things that are, so that no man may boast before God" (1 Corinthians 1:27–29).