

Exegesis

Vs. 19-20 – “And Pilate wrote a title, and put it on the cross. And the writing was Jesus Of Nazareth The King Of The Jews.” That Pilate “wrote a title” doesn’t necessarily mean he did the actual writing of Jesus’ inscription; that would’ve been done by some scribe.¹ It is more accurate to say that Pilate provided the specific wording on the notice. And as we’ll see shortly, the governor’s creative license will provoke the Jews.

Interestingly, aside from the gospels, there is no indication that such things were affixed to the cross itself; most times, inscriptions were either hung on the neck or had it carried in front of them.² Regardless, inscriptions were an integral part of crucifixions and served two functions. Firstly, as people passed, they needn’t have wondered why someone was being crucified; their offense was emblazoned for all to see. Secondly, and more importantly, knowing the specific offense might deter others from doing the same thing.

As mentioned before, crucifixions took place next to major highways, so it should come as no surprise that this one was “nigh to the city.” And that “many of the Jews” read “the title” also shouldn’t be too startling since the literacy rate in Palestine was high.³ Curiously, Pilate had the inscription written in *three* languages: “Hebrew, and Greek, and Latin.” While most notices were, by necessity, written in multiple languages, this level of linguistic diversity for a convicted criminal is unusual. One language would’ve been sufficient; three is excessive and implies something more is happening here.⁴

The Greek word translated as “Hebrew” is Ἑβραϊστί (heb-rah-is-tee’), and it can refer to either Hebrew or Aramaic.⁵ Considering that it was the vernacular of the people in Judea, it is likely Jesus’ inscription was written in Aramaic and not actual Hebrew. “Latin” was the dialect of Rome, particularly the ruling class.⁶ And “Greek” was the international language, being read by most people, Jew and Gentile alike. Thus, Pilate ensured that everyone, be they a native of Jerusalem, a Roman official, or a traveling merchant, could read Jesus’ inscription. Indeed, as the Lord himself said, “If I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me” (12:32). As

¹ Carson (1991), p. 610.

² Köstenberger (2008), p. 544, the inscription for Attalus the Christian was hung around his neck.

³ *Ibid.*, 545.

⁴ Keener (2003), 2:1138.

⁵ Carson (1991), p. 241-242.

⁶ Klink (2016), p. 793.

the King of Jews, he was the rightful ruler of the world.⁷ This trilingual placard was a fitting inscription for the Son of God.

Vs. 21-22 – John tells us that “the chief priests of the Jews” were upset with Pilate’s inscription.⁸ They came to him and said, “Write not, The King of the Jews; but that he said, I am King of the Jews.” Arguably, that would have been the more accurate representation from Sanhedrin's perspective. However, the Jews were not concerned with accuracy but with public perception. As it was, without the little modifier εἰμί (*eimi*) "I am," a passersby might assume that the Jews affirmed Jesus' self-designation. Written as a title rather than a quote, leaves them open to ridicule. Of course, Pilate wanted the misunderstanding; it is likely why he insisted on that specific wording. Throughout this whole ordeal, he had mocked the chief priests whenever he could, and he would not pass up his last chance to do so. This is why Pilate's response to the Jews was a firm, "What I have written I have written." They might've used and manipulated him, but the governor would get the last laugh.⁹

Yet, it was God who really got the last laugh. For though the Jews would not claim him, Jesus was truly their King. And though the governor thought it was a joke, the Lord of Heaven was indeed enthroned on a tree. This was all per God's will. Not by the hand of men, but by the hand of the Father was the Son placed on the cross, royalty given for peasantry.

Vs. 23-24 – John tells us, “Then the soldiers, when they had crucified Jesus, took his garments, and made four parts, to every soldier a part; and also his coat.” It was customary for executioners to get the clothes of those they executed.¹⁰ Since Jesus' belongings had to be divided into "four parts," this means that a four-man squad oversaw his execution, and each man was owed a portion of the spoils. So, despite how the Lord is often portrayed in paintings or sculptures wearing a loincloth, it is clear he was completely naked during the crucifixion.¹¹ Public nudity was disgraceful in most parts of the world, but it was especially shameful in Palestine.

However, rather than emphasize Jesus' shame, John underscores Jesus' "coat." He explains that the Lord's robe "was without seam, woven from the top throughout." Being seamless doesn't necessarily mean that the coat was expensive. Given that joining two pieces of fabric together

⁷ Beasley-Murray (1999), p. 346, “It was written in Hebrew that the Jews might understand it; in Latin that the Romans might know it; in Greek, the *lingua franca* of the world, that all nations might learn of it. “Thus did Pilate tell it out among the nations that the Lord is king,” wrote Hoskyns, in the words of Ps. 96:10.”

⁸ Morris (1995), p. 714, this is the only place in the N.T. where the phrase "the chief priest of the Jews" is used. John may contrast this with "The King of the Jews."

⁹ Carson (1991), p. 611, “[Pilate] is determined to humiliate those who have humiliated him.”

¹⁰ Kruse (2017), p. 427; Morris (1995), p. 715.

¹¹ Keener (2003), 2:1138; contra Köstenberger (2008), p. 546.

was forbidden by Mosaic law (cf. Lev. 19:19; Deut. 22:11), most Jewish clothing was “without seam.” John mentions that Jesus’ robe was “woven from the top throughout” to show that it would be difficult to divide *evenly*. This is why, instead of cutting the coat into pieces, the four soldiers decide to “cast lots for it,” something mentioned in the synoptic tradition (cf. Matt. 27:35b Mar. 15:24; Lu. 23:34b). Better that one man gets a full coat rather than four men only getting a piece of a coat.¹²

What the Synoptics leave out, however, is that this gambling was a fulfillment of prophecy. Only John explains it occurred “that the scripture might be fulfilled” and then quotes Psalm 22:18, “They parted my raiment among them, and for my vesture they did cast lots.” In fact, the closer we get to Jesus’ death, the *more* John mentions scriptural fulfillment (cf. vs. 28, 36, 37). Even the phrase, “These things therefore the soldiers did,” serves to emphasize this fact. More than anything else, John wants to highlight the prophetic aspects of Jesus’ crucifixion.

Psalm 22 is a messianic passage written by David, and it is quoted or alluded to many times in the Gospels (cf. Matt. 27:46, Mar. 15:29; Lu. 23:35, etc.).¹³ On the one hand, it talks about David’s experience with suffering; on the other hand, it has a prophetic tone to it, describing a pitiful experience that transcends David’s own. John sees Psalm 22 fulfilled in Jesus. What was for David a metaphorical expression of his tribulations was, for Jesus, a literal description of the crucifixion. Thus, rather than focus on the Lord’s state—i.e., crucified, naked, with soldiers gambling for his garments—the Beloved Apostles wants to show his readers that even this sorry situation was foreseen by the Lord. Such a fact would be a compelling evangelistic tool, particularly to a Jewish audience who would be skeptical about a crucified Messiah but certain about God’s sovereignty.¹⁴ Whatever was done on this day was known by God long ago. From a temporal perspective, pragmatism drove the soldiers to cast lots; from an eternal perspective, even something as trivial as gambling for someone’s clothes was a key point in redemptive history.

¹² Symbolic interpretations of Jesus’ seamless cloak are abundant. Some claim that seamlessness represents the unity of believers or the church. Others say that being disrobed exemplifies Jesus’ humility, his virgin birth, or how his cloak was like the priestly vestments of the O.T. (cf. Lev. 21:10). But no suggestion is perfect, and none are explicit in the text. The fact that Jesus’ cloak was seamless is simply a consequence of eyewitness testimony. Sometimes, an observation is just that, an observation. Not every detail must have theological significance. For more, see Keener (2003), 2:1140; Morris (1995), p. 715.

¹³ Klink (2016), p. 797.

¹⁴ Carson (1991), p. 612.

VIDEO DESCRIPTION

Deep Dive: The Gospel of John | Week 88 | John 19:19-24

SPEAKER: Ben Hyrne, Pastor

Tonight, we'll continue our study of the Passion. Immediately after Jesus is crucified, John tells us there was controversy about the inscription above the Lord's head and then recounts an instance of gambling. Our faithful narrator does not want us to dwell on the horrors of crucifixion; there are more important things to focus on. For it is in the missable details that great truths hide.

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