

Luke 23:38

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

And a superscription also was written over him in letters of Greek, and Latin, and Hebrew, THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS.

Analysis

And a superscription also was written over him in letters of Greek, and Latin, and Hebrew, THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS. The "superscription" (epigraphē, ἐπιγραφή) was the titulus—a placard stating the criminal's offense, displayed to warn others and justify the execution. Pilate ordered it written in three languages: Greek (the language of culture and commerce), Latin (the language of Roman law and government), and Hebrew/Aramaic (the language of Jewish religion), ensuring maximum readability in cosmopolitan Jerusalem.

John 19:19-22 reveals Pilate wrote "JESUS OF NAZARETH THE KING OF THE JEWS," and Jewish leaders protested, demanding it read "He said, I am King of the Jews." Pilate refused: "What I have written I have written." His stubborn insistence, whether from spite toward Jewish leaders or divine providence (or both), resulted in the gospel being proclaimed in three languages above the dying Savior. Though intended as mockery, it declared profound truth.

The trilingual inscription symbolizes the universality of Christ's reign and the gospel's reach. Greek, Latin, and Hebrew represented the major cultural streams of the ancient world—Hellenistic philosophy, Roman law, and Jewish religion. Above the cross, in humanity's principal tongues, God proclaimed Jesus' kingship to all nations. This foreshadows Philippians 2:9-11: "God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name: That at the name of Jesus

every knee should bow... and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord."

Historical Context

Roman crucifixion protocols required displaying the charge (*causa poenae*) to justify execution and deter others. The titulus was typically carried before the condemned en route to execution, then affixed above the cross. Archaeological evidence confirms this practice—a first-century ossuary discovered near Jerusalem contained a heel bone pierced by a crucifixion nail, and historical sources describe the placard custom.

Jerusalem's multilingual character during Passover made the trilingual inscription necessary. Jews from throughout the Diaspora spoke Greek; Roman officials and soldiers used Latin; local Jews spoke Aramaic/Hebrew. Josephus records that Jerusalem during major festivals swelled from 50,000 to over 200,000 people. Pilate's inscription ensured maximum readership, ironically turning Christ's cross into a billboard proclaiming His kingship to representatives of the entire known world. The Jewish leaders' objection reveals their recognition that this proclamation, though meant as mockery, could be read as validation.

Related Passages

Hebrews 11:1 — Definition of faith

James 2:17 — Faith and works

Study Questions

1. How does God's providence turning Pilate's mocking inscription into a universal proclamation of Christ's kingship encourage us that God works even through hostile intentions?
2. What does the trilingual inscription teach about the gospel's universal scope —its relevance to all cultures, languages, and peoples?

3. How should the irony that Christ's 'crime' (being King) was actually His true identity shape our understanding of Christian persecution—that what the world counts as shame is actually our glory?

Interlinear Text

ἵν δὲ καὶ ἐπιγραφὴ γεγραμμένη ἐπ' αὐτῷ γράμμασιν
was And also a **superscription** written over **him** in **letters**
G2258 G1161 G2532 G1923 G1125 G1909 G846 G1121

Ἐλληνικοῖς, καὶ Ῥωμαϊκοῖς καὶ Ἑβραϊκοῖς, Οὗτός ἐστιν
of Greek also Latin also Hebrew **THIS** **IS**
G1673 G2532 G4513 G2532 G1444 G3778 G2076

Ο βασιλεὺς τῶν Ἰουδαίων
THE KING G3588 OF THE JEWS
G935 G2453

Additional Cross-References

Mark 15:26 (Kingdom): And the superscription of his accusation was written over, THE KING OF THE JEWS.

Matthew 27:37 (Kingdom): And set up over his head his accusation written, THIS IS JESUS THE KING OF THE JEWS.

Mark 15:32 (Kingdom): Let Christ the King of Israel descend now from the cross, that we may see and believe. And they that were crucified with him reviled him.

Luke 23:3 (Kingdom): And Pilate asked him, saying, Art thou the King of the Jews? And he answered him and said, Thou sayest it.