

Titulus Crucis¹

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The four Gospels agree that at the Crucifixion an inscription was placed above the head² of Jesus, though they provide somewhat divergent versions of its wording.

- a) Matthew 27:37: ΟΥΤΟC ΕCΤΙΝ ΙΗCΟΥC Ο ΒΑCΙΛΕΥC ΤΩΝ ΙΟΥΔΑΙΩΝ. It is asserted that it was the crime (αίτíα) that has been written above his head.
- b) Mark 15:26: Ο ΒΑCΙΛΕΥC ΤΩΝ ΙΟΥΔΑΙΩΝ. Here, too, the inscription of the crime (ή έπιγραφή τής αίτίαc) is mentioned.
- c) Luke 23:38: Ο ΒΑCΙΛΕΥC ΤΩΝ ΙΟΥΔΑΙΩΝ ΟΥΤΟC. Some MSS add that the inscription was written γράμμαcιν Έλληνικοίc καί Ρωμαίκοίc καί Έβραϊκοίc.
- d) John 19:19: ΙΗCΟΥC Ο ΝΑΖΩΡΑΙΟC Ο ΒΑCΙΛΕΥC ΤΩΝ ΙΟΥΔΑΙΩΝ. The inscription is referred to by the loan-word τίτλοc. We are expressly told that it was Pilate who composed (έγραψε) the inscription, and (20) because the city was close, ήν γεγραμμένον Έβραϊcτί, Ρωμαίcτί, Έλληνιcτί. The High Priests of the Jews asked to change the inscription, but Pilate refused to do so.

We may sum up our sources:

1. All four Gospels agree that there was an inscription.
2. They all agree that it contained the words King of the Jews.
3. Mark and Matthew maintain that this was the αίτία of the crucifixion.
4. Matthew and John contain the name Jesus.
5. John has the epithet Nazarene.
6. John (with some MSS of Luke) says that the inscription was trilingual.
7. Only John ascribes the inscription to Pilate.

Most of this information is, as we shall presently see, fairly straightforward. There is, however, at least one point that should have raised some epigraphical eyebrows: theological eyebrows are notoriously difficult to raise.

Parallels can readily be found for carrying before criminals or affixing to them placards mentioning their crimes³, so there is no objection to points 1, 2

¹ Once again I am indebted to Hannah Cotton for her helpful remarks. I alone am responsible for the remaining faults.

² Thus expressly Matthew, implicitly the other versions.

³ Suet. *Cal.* 32.2; *Dom.* 10.1; Dio Cass. 54.3.7; Eus. *HE* 5.1.44. Suet. *Cal.* and Eus. speak of placards being carried before the condemned, the two other notices are not explicit.

and 3. The name of the criminal together with the crime are displayed on the inscription carried before the Christian Attalus⁴ (point 4) and we should not be surprised that naming the *patria* of the criminal (point 5) seems to be unparalleled in our meagre and random evidence. (The epithet Nazarene itself is common enough in the Gospels). We are left with the last two points, which call for a detailed discussion.

It is the contention of John that the *praefectus*⁵ of Judaea inscribed a placard in Latin, Greek and Aramaic⁶ that will be scrutinized in the following discussion. New Testament commentators⁷ treat the matter exhaustively, lingering, *inter alia*, on the theological significance of the statement, viz. that it announces to the world as a whole the reign of Christ — but do not seem to be aware of an obvious difficulty. With one notable exception⁸ I am not aware of any inscrip-

⁴ Eus. *HE* 5.1.44.

⁵ For the inscription of Pontius Pilatus from Caesarea, which proves that the governors of Judaea before the reign of Agrippa I were prefects rather than procurators see E. Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ (175 BC - AD 135)* I, rev. and edd. G. Vermes, F. Millar, 1973, 358.

⁶ This is the most probable meaning of *hebraisti*: a couple of verses earlier (John 19:13,17; cf. also 5.2) the same term is applied to the Aramaic names Gabbatha and Golgotha. For a succinct survey see E. Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ (175 BC - AD 135)* II, revv. and edd. G. Vermes, F. Millar, M. Black, 1979, 28 n. 118; cf. T. Rajak, *Josephus*, 1983, 230-232.

⁷ As a curiosity one might mention P.-F. Regard, "Le titre de la croix d'après les Évangiles", *Rev. Arch.* ser. 5, 28, 1928, 95-105, according to whom Mark gives the general tenor of the inscription, Matthew provides the Greek translation of the Hebrew redaction, Luke the Greek redaction and John the Greek equivalent of the official Roman redaction; G.M. Lee, "The Inscription on the Cross", *PEQ* 100, 1968, 144, apparently unaware of Regard, assigns to Mark the Greek, his informant being Simon of Cyrene, to Luke the Latin and to Matthew (who could not decipher the word Nazarene due to a nail being driven through it) the Aramaic; John, the Beloved Disciple (who reminds the author of Fagin in his prison cell) could decipher that word too. The toils of scholarship are not devoid of their amusements.

⁸ The famous inscription of Cornelius Gallus at Philae (*CIL* III 14147, *ILS* 8995; definitive edition E. Bernard, *Les inscriptions grecques et latines de Philae* II: *Haut et Bas empire*, 1969, no. 128, pp. 35-47) was first published exactly a hundred years ago: H.G. Lyons and L. Borchardt, "Eine trilingue Inschrift von Philae", *SB Berlin* 1896, 469-474; A. Erman, "Zu der hieroglyphischen Inschrift", *ibid.* 474-8; O. Hirschfeld, "Zu der lateinisch-griechischen Inschrift", *ibid.* 478-82. Erman saw, of course, that the profound differences of the hieroglyphic version as against the Latin and Greek ones must be viewed in the context of Gallus' inevitable ignorance of its contents. The immediate comments of Mommsen seem to explain the uniqueness of the case well; see T. Mommsen, "Gaius Cornelius Gallus", *Reden und Aufsätze*, 1905, 449-57 (= *Cosmopolis* 4, 1896, 544-51). At 449 he speaks of an "in ihrer Art einzige dreisprachige Inschrift", and see 450: "Vielleicht am merkwürdigstem dabei ist, dass auf dem Denkmal, welches den ersten Sieg der Römergewalt in Aegypten in drei Sprachen feiert, die alte Landessprache an erster

tion set up — or, indeed, any sort of document being composed — by a Roman in an official capacity in any language other than Latin and Greek.⁹ (Aficionados of the *Historia Augusta* industry will appreciate that the mention of the tombstone of Gordian III in five languages¹⁰ is an argument against, rather than for, the possibility of such an inscription). Closest perhaps, in time, space, and potential readers, to the inscription on the Cross are the warning inscriptions set up around the court of the Temple of Jerusalem in Latin and Greek, of which a Greek exemplar is extant.¹¹ Julius Caesar's privileges for the Jews and other official documents were also bilingually inscribed.¹² Indeed, in this respect, too, the Roman Empire differed considerably from its predecessors in the Near East: we are told that the Great King sent out his letters in the various languages and scripts of his numerous peoples,¹³ and Ptolemaic royal inscriptions made use, besides Greek, of both hieroglyphic and demotic Egyptian.¹⁴ Nor were Rome's

Stelle steht. Dies ist im römischen Herrschaftsgebiet sonst ohne Beispiel; die Römer haben allem Anschein nach die Landessprachen im allgemeinen für den offiziellen Gebrauch beseitigt, der griechischen Sprache aber, die sie dafür zuließen, durchaus den zweiten Platz angewiesen, so dass in allen öffentlichen zweisprachigen Inschriften die lateinische an erster Stelle steht. Wenn es in Aegypten, wenigstens anfänglich, anders gehalten wird — späterhin scheint man Mehrsprachigkeit bei öffentlichen Bauten daselbst überhaupt vermieden zu haben —, so ist dies ein Ausfluss des Augustischen Systems, Aegypten nicht zu behandeln als Teil des Römischen Reiches"; at 478 he accepts Erman's view of Gallus' ignorance of the hieroglyphic version. F. Zilken, *De inscriptionibus latinis graecis bilinguibus quaestiones selectae*, Diss. Bonn 1909, 71 clearly expresses the view that the hieroglyphic inscription was not composed by the authors of the Latin and Greek ones: one might classify the Gallus inscription as trilingual only in a technical sense.

9 Among those accepting the possibility of a trilingual inscription on the Cross see F. Millar, "Latin Epigraphy in the Roman Near East", *Acta Colloquii Epigraphici Latini, Helsingiae 3-6 Sept. 1991 habiti* (*Comm. Hum. Litt.* 104), edd. H. Solin, O. Salomies, U.-M. Lierz, 1995, 403-419, at 404. I am very grateful to Fergus Millar for letting me consult his manuscript prior to publication. The latest and fullest NT commentary, R.E. Brown, *The Death of the Messiah. From Gethsemane to the Grave. A Commentary on the Passion Narratives in the Four Gospels II* (*The Anchor Reference Library*), 1994, 966, claims that "the trilingualism increases the imperial or regal atmosphere". The only "evidence" for this, on p. 965, is the text referred to in the next note. I am very grateful to Prof. J.W. van Henten for drawing my attention to this recent publication.

10 *HA Gord.* 34.2-3.

11 *Jos. BJ* 5.194; 6.125; *CIJ* 1400; Schürer II (n. 6), 284-5.

12 *Jos. AJ* 14.197, 191, 319.

13 Esther 1:22. Old Testament commentators can not confirm this anyway exaggerated claim, but one can adduce the Achaemenid inscriptions from Persepolis and elsewhere, mostly trilingual in Old Persian, Babylonian and Susian, and the widespread resort to *Reichsaramäisch*.

14 W. Peremans, "Über die Zweisprachigkeit im ptolemaischen Ägypten", *Studien zur Papyrologie und antiken Wirtschaftsgeschichte (Festschrift F. Oertel)*, 1964, 55

opponents, such as Hannibal, and much later Shapur, averse to advertising their achievements in three languages.¹⁵ On the other hand, there is no need here to enumerate Latin and Greek bilingual inscriptions,¹⁶ or Roman documents in Greek from the East,¹⁷ nor, indeed, to discuss the special status accorded to Greek, and to Greek culture and civilization, by the Romans. Suffice it to say that there exists no shred of evidence that any language other than Latin and Greek was ever used by Roman officials in their dealings with provincials. How, then, are we to assess the statement of John?

At issue are the discretionary powers of governors. We should realise that not only the Emperor was what he did,¹⁸ but to some extent also provincial governors and other officials were free agents with wide discretionary powers.¹⁹ Of course our evidence is replete with examples of governors consulting emperors and receiving a variety of responses and instructions:²⁰ clearly the instances in which they acted without consultation are less well documented.²¹ Pilate might have used the local vernacular, if he so wished, without consulting models

quotes as examples the *prostagma* of Cleopatra and Caesarian, the decrees of Canopus and Rosetta and some decrees concerning asylum and amnesty.

- ¹⁵ Livy 28.46.16; for the *Res Gestae Divi Saporis* see A. Maricq, "Res Gestae Divi Saporis", *Syria* 35, 1958, 295-360.
- ¹⁶ Two older dissertations are quoted but, to judge by their frequent misquotation, sometimes only at second hand: for Zilken see above n. 8; the other is Viktor Bassler, *Die griechisch-lateinisch bilinguen Inschriften. Kommentar und Ergebnisse*, Diss. Prague 1934, a dissertation directed by A. Stein. On a recent visit to Prague I was able to obtain only one of the two volumes of the typescript dissertation, the very helpful staff at the University library being unable to ascertain the whereabouts of the other; I do not know whether another copy exists elsewhere.
- ¹⁷ E.g. R.K. Sherck, *Roman Documents from the Greek East: Senatus consulta and epistulae to the Age of Augustus*, 1969; J.H. Oliver, *Greek Constitutions of Early Roman Emperors from Inscriptions and Papyri*, 1989.
- ¹⁸ F. Millar, *The Emperor in the Roman World*, 1977, xi, but see already Ch. Wirszubski, *Libertas as a Political Idea at Rome during the Late Republic and Early Principate*, 1950, 143: "a despot's power is what the despot makes it".
- ¹⁹ See e.g. recently A. Lintott, *Imperium Romanum. Politics and Administration*, 1993, 43: "The nature of Roman government in the empire principally depended on the governor", and "Roman governors were notorious in the Republic and even under the Principate for taking important decisions themselves".
- ²⁰ Millar (n. 18) 328ff.
- ²¹ E.g. some twenty years ago I argued in a Hebrew article ("The ban on circumcision and the Bar-Kokhba rebellion", *Zion* 41, 1976, 139-147) that the ban on circumcision was applied by the *coercitio* of the governor after the revolt and that there is no need to construct a Hadrianic ban that caused the rebellion, for the application of which outside Palestine there exists no shred of evidence. Among other arguments I referred to the use of *coercitio* in the persecution of the Christians, see G.E.M. de Ste. Croix, "Why were the early Christians persecuted?", *Past and Present* 26, 1963, 6ff.; idem, "Why were the early Christians persecuted? — A rejoinder", *ibid.* 27, 1964, 28ff.

and precedent. But why would he bother with a criminal of lowly extraction and rejected by his provincial compatriots? Nonetheless, one detail in John's narrative seems to suggest that exactly this might have been the case.

It has been observed,²² that John alone refers to the inscription by the Latin loan-word *titlos*, the very word applied to the placard carried before the criminal (*praecedente titulo*, Suet *Cal.* 32.2). Though *titulus* may refer to an inscription on any material of little value and temporary use, such as labels attached to wine-jars,²³ it can also allude to engraved inscriptions put up at considerable expense.²⁴ However, the important point for our quest consists in the fact that, according to the data-base of the *TLG*, this seems to be the first occurrence of the term in both Greek literature and epigraphy, so it very probably does *not* "reflect the currency of transliterated Latin official terms in everyday provincial Greek".²⁵ The very frequent occurrences in later literature are almost exclusively Christian texts using the term hallowed by John and very often in the context of the *titulus crucis*. Possibly also the frequent use of the word in Christian epigraphy is due to its being employed in the New Testament. Be this as it may, we can not separate John's statements as to the nature of the inscription from his referring to it as a *titlos*: the two come together from the same source. It would be idle to speculate what exactly this ultimate source may have been or how the author of the Gospel became acquainted with it. However, the employment of the (in Greek) unprecedented Roman term for the inscription lends it credibility in spite of the difficulty noted above: Pilate could have ignored (or have been ignorant of) the lack of precedent and used Aramaic, perhaps for the very reason stated by John. If this conclusion is correct, it further strengthens the claims for the historicity of John's account of the trial and death of Jesus as against the Synoptic tradition.²⁶

APPENDIX: *INVENTIO TITULI*

The legend of the Invention of the True Cross²⁷ knows two versions of its identification, verification and distinction from the crosses of the two thieves. According to one version it was a miracle, according to the other it was the *titulus* that established the identity of the true cross. In John Chrysostom (*hom. Joh.* 85.1, *PG* 59.461) there is a bare mention of the *titulus*; according to Socr. *HE* 1.17 (*PG* 67.120) it was Pilate's *titulus* in the various languages that was discovered; Soz. *HE* 2.1-2 (*PG* 67.932), the longest Greek account of the story, also expli-

²² Among others by Millar 1995 (n. 9).

²³ Petr. 34.6: *pittacia... cum hoc titulo*.

²⁴ Such as that of Allia Potestas, *CIL* VI 37965 fin.

²⁵ Thus Millar 1995 (n. 9), 404.

²⁶ Cf. F. Millar, "Reflections on the Trials of Jesus", *A Tribute to Geza Vermes. Essays on Jewish and Christian Literature and History (JSOT Suppl. 100)*, edd. P.R. Davies, R.T. White, 1990, 355-381.

²⁷ J. W. Drijvers, *Helena Augusta. The Mother of Constantine the Great and the Legend of Her Finding of the True Cross*, 1992 [Dutch version 1989]; S. Borgehammar, *How the Holy Cross was Found*, 1991, *Bibliotheca Theologiae Practicae* 47. I owe these references to my friend Ora Limor.

citly quotes the *titulus* of Pilate and mentions the fact that it was written in three languages; according to Ambrose (*de ob. Theod.* 45, *CSEL* 73.395) *titulus erat Iesus Nazarenus, rex Iudaeorum*²⁸. In Rufin. *HE* 10.7 (Mommson p. 969) we read that *aderat quidem et titulus ille, qui Graecis et Latinis et Hebraicis litteris a Pilato fuerat conscriptus*, but nevertheless a miracle was also needed: consequently the finding of the *titulus* is omitted from Borgehammar's reconstruction of the source of the story, Gelasius.²⁹ In the legend the account of John prevails.

The earliest witness who saw the *titulus* is Egeria (37.1), according to whom it was being shown with the remains of the Cross on Good Friday. Unfortunately, this otherwise acute observer does not provide us with any details of the inscription.³⁰ Among later pilgrims mention should be made of the so-called Antoninus Placentinus (20, *CSEL* 39.172): *titulus... in quo scriptum est: Hic est rex Iudaeorum... vidi et in manu mea tenui et osculatus sum*. This seems to render — or reproduce the Latin text of — the version of Luke.

There exists no thorough treatment of the evolution of the representation of the *titulus crucis* in art, but see E. Lucchesi Palli, s.v. 'Kreuztitulus', in *Lexikon der christlichen Ikonographie*, 1970, II 648-9 and S. Longland, "'Pilate Answered: What I have Written I have Written'", *Metrop. Mus. Art Bull.* Jan. 1968, 410-434 for some interesting medieval examples. On considering any random sample of the innumerable paintings of the subject one gets the impression that something might be gained for the history of Hebrew scholarship by scrutinizing the various versions of the Hebrew/Aramaic text.

Evelyn Waugh, in his non-bestseller *Helena* (1950) leads up to the Invention of the Cross as the end of the novel and its culmination, see 257: "...members of three crosses, detached and well-preserved, a notice board split into two, ... Half the notice board which bore, ill-scrawled in the three great tongues of the ancient world [on the next page we are told that one is Hebrew], the supreme title, was still attached to one of the taller posts...". Nevertheless, he also still needs a miracle to identify the true cross-beam.

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²⁸ For a recent discussion of the passage, with previous literature, see M. Biermann, *Die Leichenreden des Ambrosius von Mailand. Rhetorik, Predigt, Politik (Hermes Einzelschriften 70)*, 1995, 187-8.

²⁹ Borgehammar (n. 27), 39.

³⁰ Nothing is said about the wording of the inscription, so it is somewhat strange that Drijvers (n. 27), 92 knows that the text was: "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews", written in Greek, Latin and Hebrew.