

# Knowing God in the Word

That I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death. Philippians 3:10.

## Contradictions in Scripture: The Titles on the Cross

When it comes to what some call “contradictions” in Scripture, the most common occurrences we find of these supposed discrepancies are differences between the accounts in the four gospels. We have seen throughout this study many cases when one gospel might disagree with the others regarding the details of a certain event. And in some cases, like those of Peter’s denials or the women at the tomb, the contradiction is magnified by the fact that not one of the gospels agrees with the others, but all of them give a different account of the event. In this message, we will discuss another such difficulty, regarding the wording of the titles placed upon Christ’s cross.

The casual student might not see this difficulty at first, for all the gospels agree that there was such an accusation written against Him. Yet the more careful student cannot help but notice that the wording of the accusation as it is written in the four gospels is different in every case. Not one of the four gospels agrees with any other one regarding what exactly this writing was. We will demonstrate this below by quoting these four passages.

Matthew 27:37. *And they put up over His head the accusation written against Him: THIS IS JESUS THE KING OF THE JEWS.*

Mark 15:26. *And the inscription of His accusation was written above: THE KING OF THE JEWS.*

Luke 23:38. *And an inscription also was written over Him in letters of Greek, Latin, and Hebrew: THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS.*

John 19:19. *Now Pilate wrote a title and put it on the cross. And the writing was: JESUS OF NAZARETH, THE KING OF THE JEWS.*

As you can see, each one of these accusations is quoted differently. All these titles cannot be correct. So which one was it that was really placed over His head on the cross?

Some argue that a contradiction in and of itself is not a bad thing. They claim that the Bible is eyewitness testimony. Then, they point out that, when describing traumatic events, usually eyewitnesses will differ in what they perceive to have happened in regards to certain, small details.

An example would be a fatal car wreck. Police are interviewing people who are witnesses to determine who was at fault. They will find that the witnesses, even though they saw the accident occur, do not always agree on all the little details. For example, one man might have just been walking across the road, and was barely missed by one driver involved in the accident. Then, the car that almost hit him collided with another car. He assumes that the car that almost hit him must have been at fault. Yet a woman who watched the accident from a window across the street might have seen a stoplight turn red for the other car involved, and realize that it was this car running the red that caused the accident, not the car that frightened the pedestrian when it almost hit him. Thus, these two give different testimony because, although they were both eyewitnesses, they both saw things from a different perspective, and noticed details that the other didn’t.

Now some would suggest that this is the way it is when it comes to different records of events in the gospels as they are written by the gospel authors. Some of the authors may have had a different perspective on the events, and so they wrote slightly differently. These small discrepancies, they say, only prove that these were real eyewitnesses, and make their testimony more reliable, not less.

Yet let us think about this argument carefully. Though it might be reasonable to assume that four eyewitnesses might have a different perspective on the way things happened, it is utterly impossible for the same witness to tell multiple versions of the same story without being discovered as a liar. And that, in fact, is what those who make this claim about Scripture are actually saying.

For if we firmly believe that the Bible is the inspired Word of God, then we must admit that every book, no matter who its human author was, was actually written by the same person...the Holy Spirit. And therefore, for Him to give four different accounts of the same event in four different passages would be proof of the extreme unreliability of what He had to say, and not the other way around. A person who will say one thing one minute and another the next is clearly showing that he deals with deception, not the truth. Thus, it is impossible that the Holy Spirit would inspire errors in three of the four (if not all four) gospels.

Not only that, but two of the four gospels were not written by eyewitnesses at all. John and Matthew were both disciples and followers of Jesus Christ, and thus saw for themselves what happened regarding these things. Yet both Mark and Luke were not eyewitnesses, and only got their information from those who were, or from direct revelation from God. Thus, any discrepancies between their writings and the other two gospels cannot be marked down to the type of error an eyewitness would make. Since these men were never eyewitnesses, their accounts of what happened cannot be expected to contain actual witness perspectives. So this explanation doesn't hold water in the case of these two gospels. This doesn't prove a point about eyewitnesses, for these men never were that. Rather, it proves a point about God. If God cannot inspire a man's words so that what he says is correct, then we cannot trust what God has written.

Finally, the four gospels give us an opportunity to "check" what God has said against the other gospel authors. One principle that a wise person always keeps in mind is that someone who will lie to you when you can check up on what he is saying will doubtlessly lie in other situations where you cannot confirm what he is saying. How foolish it would be to place absolute trust in someone to tell the truth when you knew he had lied to you in the past! Yet that is what those who would argue this way about the discrepancies in the four gospels seem to expect us to do. When we can check up on what God says versus the other gospels, we are supposed to find that His statements contain error. Yet when we cannot check up on what He says, we are supposed to decide that what He says is perfectly right! This is utter foolishness. If God cannot teach the truth in regards to small things, or in regards to things that are repeated several times in the gospels, then we cannot expect Him to speak accurately regarding big things, or things which we have no other statement to check them against. To believe this of the gospels is to undermine entirely the reliability of the Bible.

Yet how, then, do we explain the seeming contradiction in the titles on the cross? Does not this contradiction prove that the words of some of these gospel authors must not be exactly what was truly written? I do not believe that this is the case. There is an explanation of the different wording in the four gospels, if we will just take the time to slow down and examine what is really said, and see if we can determine what really happened.

First of all, let us look at the passage from Mark more closely. Mark 15:26 reads, "And the inscription of His accusation was written above: THE KING OF THE JEWS." Notice that this merely says that this "inscription of His accusation" was "written above." It never says that it was placed on the cross, just that it was written. This is probably what was written in the official Roman records as the accusation against Him. Such records were always kept of proceedings in the Roman courts, to at least give what went on there an appearance of justice and legality. Thus, this inscription in Mark had nothing to do with the titles placed on His cross at all. This inscription was merely what was written in the records for Rome.

So we have solved the difficulty in Mark. The wording is different, not because of an error, but because this is the writing that was written in the records, not on the cross, and thus was understandably different. Yet this still leaves us with the contradiction between the other three gospels, all of which definitely do record writings placed on His cross. In John 19:20, we read our first clue as to the possible explanation.

*20. Then many of the Jews read this title, for the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city; and it was written in Hebrew, Greek, and Latin.*

Here we have the first possible explanation for this apparent “contradiction.” The words of the accusation against the Lord were written in three languages, Hebrew (or Aramaic,) Greek, and Latin. Thus, the exact wording of the title in each of these three languages may have been different. Perhaps Pilate was not an expert at these languages, and just wrote what came most easily to his mind in the languages he was less familiar with. Thus, the Hebrew read slightly different from the Greek, and the Latin read slightly different from the other two. In this case, Matthew, Luke, and John might each record what was said in one of the three different languages, translating it by the Spirit’s power more exactly back into Greek. So, when properly translated, what was written was quite different in the three different languages. This is one very possible explanation of this apparent contradiction. Yet there are other explanations possible.

Let us examine where each of these three accusations comes into the story in the three gospels still in question. First of all, in Matthew 27:36-37, we read, “Sitting down, they kept watch over Him there. And they put up over His head the accusation written against Him: THIS IS JESUS THE KING OF THE JEWS.” Verse 35 discusses the parting of the garments. So this placing of the title took place after the parting of the garments, and after they had already sat down to keep watch over Him. Does the Luke title come in at the same place? Let us examine it and see!

Luke 23:36-38 reads, “The soldiers also mocked Him, coming and offering Him sour wine, and saying, “If You are the King of the Jews, save Yourself.” And an inscription also was written over Him in letters of Greek, Latin, and Hebrew: THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS.” Notice that this title is not said to be put up over His head, but rather to be written over Him, as if the writing was done while someone was standing on a ladder of some sort and inscribing it over His head. This happens after the parting of the garments and of the mocking.

So, what about John? When does he bring this title in? Let us look at the passage in question in the gospel of John and find out.

*John 19:17-19 reads, “And He, bearing His cross, went out to a place called the Place of a Skull, which is called in Hebrew, Golgotha, where they crucified Him, and two others with Him, one on either side, and Jesus in the center. Now Pilate wrote a title and put it on the cross. And the writing was: JESUS OF NAZARETH, THE KING OF THE JEWS.”*

This title is said to have been written by Pilate himself. It seems unlikely that Pilate followed the Lord out to be crucified, so apparently he fixed this title to the cross before the Lord left his presence. At the very least, he wrote this title to be placed on the cross as He was crucified, so it should have been on the cross long before the soldiers relaxed and thought about dividing His garments.

So, how can this be? Now we appear not only to have three titles, but also three time frames and three different manners in which they were placed on the cross. Have we made our discrepancy even worse? I do not believe so. I believe the explanation for these different titles as well as different time frames can come to us if we pay careful attention to what is said in John 19:21-22.

*Therefore the chief priests of the Jews said to Pilate, “Do not write, ‘The King of the Jews,’ but, ‘He said, “I am the King of the Jews.”” Pilate answered, “What I have written, I have written.”*

Pilate, far too late, seems to finally get his courage up here, and refuses to grant the chief priests' request. Yet here we start to see a possible answer to our dilemma of the three different titles on the cross. The Jews complain to Pilate about what he had written on the cross. They want it changed to something they devised. Pilate refuses to change the title to what they requested. Yet what if Pilate actually did change the title, in a compromise with the Jews, though he did not actually change it to what they wanted? This change might then have taken place after the Lord was already on the cross. He might have had a new version written, and ordered it to be put on the cross in the place of the old accusation after the soldiers had parted His garments. Then, upon further complaints by the Jews, he might have had it changed yet again. This time, the message was not pre-written, and those in charge had to write it themselves by inscribing it over His head. Under this scenario, then, John would record the first title Pilate wrote himself, Matthew would record the second title that was placed over His head after the complaint of the Jews, and Luke would record the third and final title written directly over His head while He hung on the cross. The first title in John was written first in Hebrew, then in Greek, and finally in Latin. The second title does not tell us of other languages, but the third one does, saying that it was written in Greek first, then in Latin, and finally in Hebrew. Did the authors really not care what order these languages were in? Or did the original have a different word order from its replacement, and that is what causes the seeming discrepancy? I believe the latter.

Thus, there is no contradiction here. The Jews' complaints caused Pilate to change the accusation against the Lord twice, perhaps to compromise with them, or perhaps to just continue to rub it in their faces. Making careful note of the different times when the inscriptions are mentioned in the gospels, we can see when these took place, and that they are not the same. Again, there is no contradiction in Scripture here. This is just like all the other supposed "contradictions" we have seen. It is caused in the minds of those reading by failing to note carefully what the Scriptures actually say.

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