

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

August, 1897

THE INSCRIPTIONS ON THE CROSS

Question No. 2

We have had several Questions addressed to us on this important subject.

These have always been a source of perplexity to many a Bible student.

It is well known that four different forms are forced on our attention, being for some reason usually printed in large capital letters, as follows:—

Matthew: This is Jesus the King of the Jews (27:37).

Mark: The King of the Jews (15:26).

Luke: This is the King of the Jews (23:38).

John: Jesus of Nazareth the King of the Jews (19:19).

Some explain the apparent discrepancy by assuming that there was one full inscription ("This is Jesus of Nazareth the King of the Jews"), and that each evangelist selected the words which best accorded with the character in which Christ was presented in his gospel. This is ingenious, but it affords too wide a scope to human instrumentality in Inspiration to please or satisfy us.

Others assume that as it was written in three languages, there might have been some variation in each of the three, and that each evangelist gives one of the three versions. This, we believe, is the more popular or general explanation of the difficulty.

But is there a difficulty? If so, is it in the Text, or do we put it there by starting with the assumption that there was only one Inscription? If there was only one, then of course there cannot be several different forms of it and each be correct. One must be right and the others wrong. This is where the difficulty lies, and our belief is that it is created by the readers and not by the writers.

We answer the question therefore by asking another:—Was there only one Inscription; or were there more? Let us look and see.

First, with regard to Mark, we may put him aside for the moment, because he does not profess to give a version which he or anyone else had seen. He merely mentions "the accusation" or bill of indictment, which may or may not have been the same as "the title" of which the others speak.

If it were, then it is sufficiently like Luke's to be identical with one of the Greek, Latin, or Hebrew inscriptions which he gives.

Secondly, as to time:—In John 19:19 we read that "Pilate wrote a title and put it on the cross." Whether written by Pilate's own hand or by some person acting for him, it was undoubtedly written in Pilate's presence and put then and there upon the cross before it left Pilate. For the act is recorded in connection with his delivering Jesus to the Jews and His being "led away" to be crucified. This was written, not like Luke's in "Greek and Latin and Hebrew" characters, but in "Hebrew and Greek and Latin." Pilate would certainly have written in the official language—Latin—and therefore the last was evidently regarded by him as the place of authority. This would distinguish it from Luke's in which the Hebrew was put last. In

any case it was put on the cross itself, and that before it left Pilate's presence and before it arrived at Golgotha.

We know that the Jews objected to this particular title, and tried to induce Pilate to alter it. Pilate merely replied, "What I have written, I have written" (John 19:22). He implies that he is not disposed to alter it: but there is nothing to make a subsequent alteration impossible. We cannot tell how earnestly or pertinaciously the objections were urged, or with what success they met: we are told, however, of the commencement of the altercation.

We only know that some time after Jesus was put upon the cross, and after the garments were divided, and after they had cast lots upon His vesture, that they then sat down and watched Him there (Matt 27:36), while they were watching "they" then and there "set up over His head" another inscription. By what means it was obtained we are not told, or by what authority. It may have been without authority, for it appears as if it were in only one language (probably Greek).

This Inscription may have taken the place of Pilate's, or have been added to it, being placed "over His head." But it was put there, not by the "soldiers" who nailed Him and parted His garments, but by "they" who had crucified Him.

The official mockings followed the setting up of this title (Matthew's: compare Matt 27:37-43 with Luke 23:35-37); and then, after the mockings of the "rulers," Luke tells us that another three-language title was put up or written over Him.

So that it would appear (1) that Pilate's was the first official title, put on the cross in his presence; (2) that while the arguments were being pressed, the title recorded in Matthew was put up in addition to it or in substitution for it, and was intermediate until (3) the one mentioned by Luke was brought in official form, modified according to the request of the Jews in John 19:21. This was seen about the sixth hour (Luke 23:44).

There is nothing unreasonable in our explanation. We know that there were altercations, but we are not told how the tide of victory fluctuated or what was the result; we submit that these three different titles are the evidences of that conflict and mark its various stages and its final issue.

In any case, those who may hesitate to accept our explanation, have got to account not only for the variation in the words, but for the differences of the times and occasions.

Question No. 3

Nemo, London. "How shall we reconcile such passages as Matthew 23:34-36 and

Revelation 18:24 with Luke 23:34? How was the prayer on the cross answered?"

As in Acts 2:22-40, and not as the religious world teaches.

There was no petition for indiscriminate forgiveness whether they wanted or not; it was a request, under plea of their ignorance of the full extent of the wickedness they were consummating, that judgment might be suspended and that door re-opened for mercy which Israel and her rulers had closed by the murder of the Root and Offspring of David, the Holy One of God, the nation's Lord and Messiah. With the seventy weeks running out, what could save Jerusalem from instant destruction? But for the covenant with David, nothing stood between Jehovah and Israel to ward off the curse for the broken law. The sacrifices had only been restored for seventy weeks, and only for the express purpose of presenting the Son of David, i.e., Messiah, to the nation. They were back where they were in 2 Chronicles 21, having neither the house of David nor sacrifices to stay the sword of Jehovah; for, whether the king broke the covenant or they destroyed the line of David, the practical result to them was the same.

But that prayer was sufficient.

The distinction between God's purpose and man's responsibility clears all up. It was open to every individual Pharisee, to every individual scribe, to every individual chief priest; nay, to every individual Israelite by repentance to deliver himself on the day of Pentecost from that evil generation of Jews which the Lord had said should not pass away till vengeance should overtake it for all the righteous blood shed upon the earth. It was called "Jerusalem" in those days; but its true name is "Babylon," a name which will be openly stamped upon it at some time between to-day and the commencement of the Apocalyptic judgments.

The offer of "Messiah" was repeated as a result of this prayer; but at the stoning of Stephen, the Lord had again exchanged this title for that more comprehensive one of "Son of Man," which, now that He had been "lifted up," was the sign of impending judgment. Stephen's prayer, however, further availed to ward off the judgment—as the continuation of the Book of Acts proves. But at last came the destruction of Jerusalem; and the curse for the broken law fell upon the Jews. The "Son of Man," however, did not descend. That was owing to God's most gracious purpose in calling the apostle Paul; so that from Acts 8 and thenceforward, the title "Son of Man" does not occur again in Scripture until, in view of the completion of that purpose by the rapture of the Church, the question of judgment is re-opened in the Apocalypse.

The basis of these is clear enough from Daniel. The Chaldee portion of the Book closes with a reference to the Lord under His comprehensive title of "Son of Man." Daniel was puzzled. So he is afterwards told in the Hebrew portion that "Messiah" would be rejected and cut off, and Jerusalem destroyed—which explains the position.