

YHWH on the Cross?



Salvador Dali. *Christ of St. John of the Cross* [detail], (oil on canvas), 1951.
Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum, Glasgow.

In John 19: 19 we read, “Pilate had a notice prepared and fastened to the cross. It read: ‘Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews.’ Many of the Jews read this sign, for the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city, and the sign was written in Hebrew, Latin and Greek.” In *The Creator beyond Time and Space* (Costa Mesa, CA: Word for Today, 1995), Chuck Missler argues that the Hebrew phrase forms an acrostic, the first letter of each of four Hebrew words spelling YHWH, the tetragrammaton for the name of God. Recognizing this, claims Missler, prompts the chief priests “to protest to Pilate, “Do not write ‘The King of the Jews,’ but that this man claimed to be king of the Jews” (John 19: 21). I had read Missler’s argument years ago, and trusting it, incorporated it into my teaching.

I was wrong.

After listening to my Audible lecture on John 19: 19, Russ Wills, one of our learned LBS students, asked for clarification on a point of Hebrew grammar in the phrase “Jesus of

Nazareth, the King of the Jews.” In researching an answer, I found that Missler is wrong, and that I had perpetuated his error. Mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa!

Here’s the scoop. The Gospel according to John is written in Greek, as are all of the New Testament books. The Greek phrase, “Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews” in John 19: 19 is: Ἰησοῦς ὁ Ναζωραῖος ὁ βασιλεὺς τῶν Ἰουδαίων. A Latin translation would read: “Iesus Nazarenus Rex Iudaeorum,” (from which we get the acrostic so often seen in Christian art: INRI). Missler claims that the Hebrew would have read: “Yeshua HaNazarei v Melech HaYehudim (the “v” is “w,” in English), making the tetragrammaton, YHWH.

But here’s the thing: Grammatically, the Greek construction used on the sign of the cross is an appositive; there is no conjunctive “and” in the Greek inscription (καὶ or δὲ), nor is there in a correct English translation. In order to make Missler’s acrostic YHWH work, the Greek needs a conjunctive “and,” or the letter װ (*waw*) in Hebrew (“Jesus of Nazareth, and the King of the Jews”). It does not have one. Thus correctly translating the Greek into Hebrew forms the acrostic YHHH, not YHWH.

I don’t know of any instances in Old Testament Hebrew in which an appositive construction has a conjunctive (*waw*) when referring to the same person (e.g, Judges 11: 25: “Are you better than Balak son of Zippor, king of Moab?”). Adding a conjunctive would obviously create confusion: “Are you better than Balak son of Zippor and the king of Moab?” In the same way, “Jesus of Nazareth and the King of the Jews” invites the impression that two people are nailed to the cross: Jesus of Nazareth and the King of the Jews!

As Job said in Steven Mitchell’s translation of the Book of Job: “I take back everything I said, and I am content about being dust” (Job 41: 6)!