

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS



YHWH, Above the Cross

by J.K. McKee updated 24 February, 2010 www.messianicapologetics.net

I heard a Messianic teacher say that the Divine Name YHWH was spelled out on the writing above Yeshua's cross. Is this true?

The Scriptures that are often made light of concerning this belief include Matthew 27:37, "And above His head they put up the charge against Him which read, 'THIS IS YESHUA THE KING OF THE JEWS,'" and John 19:19, "Pilate also wrote an inscription and put it on the cross. It was written, 'YESHUA THE NAZARENE, THE KING OF THE JEWS'" (cf. Mark 15:26; Luke 23:38). What we know for certain from the Gospels is that Hebrew was not the only language in which this superscription was written. John 19:20 makes the important remark, "many of the Jews read this inscription, for the place where Yeshua was crucified was near the city; and it was written in Hebrew, Latin *and* in Greek." At the very least, this indicates that there were more than just Hebrew-speaking Jews present in Jerusalem at the time of Yeshua's crucifixion, but also probably indicates that the Greeks and Romans present at this event needed to know that Yeshua was indeed King of the Jews.

Some have made light of the record in John 19:21-22, where "the chief priests of the Jews were saying to Pilate, 'Do not write, "The King of the Jews"; but that He said, "I am King of the Jews.'" Pilate answered, 'What I have written I have written.'" This claim is made to support the belief that the Divine Name YHWH was somehow spelled out in the Hebrew superscription above our Lord as He was dying. Some conclude that the Sadducees wanted the name YHWH pulled down and the words be re-written. But notice that this is not what the text tells us. They wanted it torn down because they wanted Pilate to write the mocking statement "I am King of the Jews." History reveals that Pontius Pilate was no friend of the Jewish people in Israel, and that he was censored by the authorities in Rome for how he treated them. Varied traditions indicate that he was either executed, committed suicide, or was exiled because of his poor administration.¹ If indeed antagonistic toward the Jews, Pilate would have wanted Yeshua's cross to say something to the effect that the king of the Jews was a "dead man," and that Rome had prevailed over them.

While our ministry *fully affirms* the Divinity of Messiah Yeshua, we can find no evidence to support the conclusion that the name YHWH was spelled above the cross in the words "Yeshua the Nazarene, the King of the Jews." Many who make this assumption claim that the Hebrew would have read *Yeshua haNatzri v'melech haYehudim*, beginning with the first four letters of God's Divine Name: YHVH or YHWH. The problem with this is that the statement actually translates as "Yeshua the Nazarene **and** king of the Jews," notably including the Hebrew conjunction *vav* (ו), generally meaning "and." If this were an accurate rendering it would be reflected in John's Greek transcription with the conjunction *kai* (καί), also generally meaning "and." But all John 19:19 reads with is *Iēsous ho Nazōraios ho basileus tōn Ioudaion* (Ἰησοῦς ὁ Ναζωραῖος ὁ βασιλεὺς τῶν Ἰουδαίων), with no *kai* present in the text.

The conjunction *vav* (ו) or "and" is also not present in modern Hebrew translations of the Greek Apostolic Scriptures in John 19:19. The Salkinson-Ginsburg translation reads with *Yeshua haNatzri melech haYehudim* (ישוע הנצרי מלך היהודים), meaning "Yeshua the Nazarene, king of the Jews." The 1991 UBSHNT reads with *Yeshua m'Natzerat melech haYehudim* (ישוע מנצרת מלך היהודים),

¹ Cf. Lorman M. Petersen, "Pilate," in *NIDB*, pp 789-790.

“Yeshua from Nazareth, king of the Jews.” While it may sound interesting, and tickle some ears, the Hebrew that would have appeared above Yeshua’s cross did not spell out the Divine Name YHWH. Author Douglas Hamp confirms these conclusions:

“In none of the texts above do we see the word *kai*, which, if the acrostic *YHWH* had been written in Hebrew, would have appeared in the Greek. If it appeared in at least one of the texts, then we might conclude that it was really there. However, since we don’t see it in any of the texts, which are our *only* records of what was (or was not) on that sign, we must conclude that the acrostic *YHWH* was not on the cross. It is best to be silent where the Bible is silent. Regardless, however, of what it spelled out, the reason that the Jewish leaders were angry was not because the writing somehow spelled out *YHWH*, but because it said He was the king of Jews, an obvious declaration of messiahship, which they plainly rejected.”²

If Bible readers really want to see Yeshua the Messiah portrayed as YHWH, then it would be much more beneficial for them to investigate the many intertextual references from the Tanach, quoted in the Apostolic Scriptures—where passages directly applying to the LORD **are applied to Yeshua**, with Him integrated into the Divine Identity.³

J.K. McKee (B.A., University of Oklahoma; M.A., Asbury Theological Seminary) is the editor of Messianic Apologetics (www.messianicapologetics.net), a division of Outreach Israel Ministries (www.outreachisrael.net). He is a 2009 recipient of the Zondervan Biblical Languages Award for Greek. He is author of numerous books, dealing with a wide range of topics that are important for today’s Messianic Believers. He has also written many articles on theological issues, and is presently focusing his attention on Messianic commentaries of various books of the Bible.

Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are from the *New American Standard, Updated Edition* (NASU), © 1995, published by The Lockman Foundation.

² Douglas Hamp, *Discovering the Language of Jesus* (Santa Ana, CA: Calvary Chapel Publishing, 2005), 77.

³ For further consideration, consult Robert M. Bowman, Jr. and J. Ed Komoszewski, *Putting Jesus in His Place: The Case for the Deity of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2007), and Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008).