

*Verba volant, scripta manent.*¹

Classical Languages in New Testament Times



The New Testament was written in the Roman Empire. You might wonder why was it not written in Latin. Greek was widely spoken in New Testament times in the Eastern part of the Roman Empire. Even in the Western part Greek was the language of literature and general communication. It was not quite the same Greek as the Ancient Greek of the Plato and Aristotle, however, but a dialect called *Koine* which first arose in the armies of Alexander the Great. The various dialects which formed ancient Greek were replaced by *Koine* which everyone could understand. So even Paul's letters written from Rome itself were in Greek. If you do not know it already, learn the Greek alphabet. You can do so here: <https://www.memrise.com/course/77649/ancient-greek-alphabet/> It is very useful as the letters are used in maths and science.

In Matthew 27:37, Mark 15:26, Luke 23:28 and John 19:19-21 we read of the superscription that Pilate had put up over the cross when Jesus was crucified. It was written in Latin, Greek and Hebrew. He chose these three languages for a good reason. Latin was the official language of the Roman Empire of which he was an official. Greek was the widely spoken language of the Empire as mentioned above. Hebrew was the religious language of the province. Although many of the ordinary people did not speak it the learned people – the Sadducees and the Pharisees understood it. To understand why the wording given in each of the gospels is slightly different read <https://christiananswers.net/q-aig/aig-t001.html> which also gives a graphic showing what the inscription in the three languages would have looked like. As you will read in this article, it is probable that the Latin inscription came first.

Originally the inscription would have had no spaces between the letters and been in capital letters:
IESVSN AZARENVSREXIVDAEORVM.

The spaces give us:
IESVS NAZARENVS REX IVDAEORVM.

In Latin inscriptions a V can stand for a U:
IESUS NAZARENUS REX IUDAEORUM.

In Latin there is no letter J. Where we would write J you will find and I:
JESUS NAZARENUS REX JUDAEORUM.

¹ Words fly away: writing remains.

In lower case letters this is:

Jesus Nazarenus Rex Judaeorum.

Jesus, the Nazarene, King of the Jews.

The Greek translation came next:

ΟΥΤΟΣ ΕΣΤΙΝ Ο ΒΑΣΙΛΕΥΣ ΤΩΝ ΙΟΥΔΑΙΩΝ

ΟΥΤΟΣ ΕΣΤΙΝ Ο ΒΑΣΙΛΕΥΣ ΤΩΝ ΙΟΥΔΑΙΩΝ

ουτος εστιν ο βασιλευς των ιουδαιων

This is the king of (the) Jews

The Hebrew inscription was last: This Is Jesus The King Of The Jews.

If you have a synchronological chart have a look at the time of the crucifixion to see what was happening in other parts of the world.

Things to do:

Don't forget to make brief notes as you go along.

Keep up your practice of the Greek alphabet until you really know it well.