

Lost in Translation

What gets missed when reading the Bible in English

There's a precocious little girl in the novel I am currently reading who asks questions of her Sunday school teacher which might cross others' minds, but to which they would not dare give voice. Thus she asked 'Did Lazarus smell when Jesus brought him back from the dead?'

When I read the Bible I find my mind asking similar questions. Some of them arise because I am not reading the Bible in the language in which it was written. For instance, I was looking at the encounter between Pilate and Jesus just before the crucifixion. How did Jesus, a Jew, and Pilate, a Roman, understand each other, I wondered? What language or languages were they speaking, and how many of the bystanders could understand them? After all, at least one person there heard and understood this subtle dialogue well enough to be able to pass it on to the Gospel writers, and if there was an official interpreter present as well, he is absent from the Gospels.

Just imagine Pilate speaking in English and Jesus replying in, say, Turkish, and consider the extent to which the nuances of the dialogue might transcend the language barrier, in this NIV version of the text from John 18:-

33 Pilate then went back inside the palace, summoned Jesus and asked him, "Are you the king of the Jews?"

34 "Is that your own idea," Jesus asked, "or did others talk to you about me?"

35 "Am I a Jew?" Pilate replied. "It was your people and your chief priests who handed you over to me. What is it you have done?"

36 Jesus said, "My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews. But now my kingdom is from another place."

37 "You are a king, then!" said Pilate. Jesus answered, "You are right in saying I am a king. In fact, for this reason I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me."

38 "What is truth?" Pilate asked. With this he went out again to the Jews and said, "I find no basis for a charge against him."

39 But it is your custom for me to release to you one prisoner at the time of the Passover. Do you want me to release 'the king of the Jews'?"

Since this inquisition is what one might call a pre-trial hearing, it would be fair to expect the educated Pilate to use *classical* Latin, but would Jesus, whose native language was Aramaic, have understood its legal niceties? At best he could have been expected to understand colloquial or *vulgar* Latin, as spoken by the Roman soldiers occupying Palestine. In Latin, the word for king is 'Rex' – indeed that was the word used in the Latin version of the inscription on the cross (of which more later). The Romans had not had a king 'Rex' for some hundreds of years, but when they had, he was elected by the people. So was Pilate implying that Jesus had the potential to be the Jews' popularly elected king – if so, no wonder the high priests stirred up such an overwhelming vote for Barabbas? Pilate had been in trouble with the Jews more than once during his period of rule in Palestine through his lack of sensitivity, to the extent that his position was threatened. If he used the word 'Rex' it could have been an insult to the chief priests, especially since the Roman kings of the past were not only in charge of the law, as chief magistrates, but chief priests as well. So, simply by saying 'Rex' Pilate could be offering a gratuitous insult to those who prided themselves on being in charge of Jewish Law in addition to their priestly role. Jesus as 'Rex' would also have been challenging to the Jewish monarch, Herod the Tetrarch, who in terms of his limited domains (which included Jesus's native Galilee), was a much lesser figure than his father King Herod the Great, both of them very much pawns of the Romans.

The 'Jews' accused Jesus of committing blasphemy, a capital offence according to their law, in one of the Bible's harshest and most unforgiving verses - Leviticus 24:16. But to set yourself up against the ruler of a puppet Roman regime sounds like a criminal offence in Roman

eyes as well to me. Certainly in Luke's account, Jesus was accused of 'perverting the people', and was portrayed as someone who was trying to deny the Romans their taxes – though neither Pilate nor Herod were apparently convinced by this. Their view put the pressure back on the Jesus's accusers, because it highlighted their dependency on Pilate's Roman authority to exert their own. In view of the Jews' proven capability to run circles around Pilate politically, Jesus could have been a pawn in a larger political game, made more intriguing by the fact that Caiaphas the high priest was actually appointed by the Romans.

As an aside, Greek adopted the Latin word 'Rex' as its own not so long afterwards, when the barbarians started to seize parts of the Roman Empire, as a title for the barbarian leaders.

So by one means or another 'The Greeks had a word for it', and *common* Greek was used to breach language barriers in the near-East thanks to an earlier invading army, that of Alexander the Great. (It wasn't until the seventeenth century that a language used like this became known as a *Lingua Franca* – and that's yet another story.) The Septuagint and the New Testament were written in common Greek, and its universality is underlined by the New Testament writers resorting to the Greek version of the Old Testament when quoting it in two cases out of three. It seems fair to assume that they would not have done this if they thought the Aramaic version was more universally understood and more reliable.

The Greek word for king was *Basileus* (the word used in the Greek NT), but in common Greek it came to mean something else. We talk of Roman *emperors*, although since Rome was in transition between a republic and a dictatorship the title does not really represent the role of a man who was somewhere between President and Dictator. He was the *Basileus* in common Greek parlance. So if Pilate actually used the word *Basileus* for 'king', he could have placed Jesus in a role that directly challenged the Roman Leader as well as the Jewish political system. That also sounds like a criminal offence against Roman law, and Jesus's accusers certainly played the 'emperor' card when

they accused him of urging the withholding of taxes that were Caesar's (the same title as *Emperor* or *Basileus*).

One of the versions of the inscription on the cross has it that the Jews tried to insist that the words 'self-styled' (my translation) preceded 'King of the Jews'. However, if the genealogical table at the beginning of Matthew had been available to Pilate, he would know that Jesus had a blood-line stretching back to King David, so might well be the true King of the Jews. If Matthew was able to get hold of this information, it must have been around in the lifetime of Jesus, and who knows whether the high priests were aware of it – Nicodemus could have told them this in all innocence, for example. It would have been challenging to them if Pilate had described him as a King in their language – but was it Hebrew or Aramaic? Oh how scholars argue about this, and different versions of the Bible variously translate the verses about the inscriptions on the cross as being in Latin, Greek and Hebrew - or Aramaic – no wonder the NRSV translators bottled out of plumping for one or the other by giving the alternative in a footnote.

Pilate was in Palestine for the best part of a decade, plenty of time to learn some of the local language, although the Romans had the reputation of being like the English abroad – speaking their own language, but loudly! My own view is that he would have been more familiar with Aramaic, since Hebrew was more the language between earth and heaven, and Aramaic made the world go round. There was more money in Aramaic, since it was very widely used commercially in the near East. Even in a theological context though it was the Aramaic translation of the Old Testament that the Gospel writers resorted to when the Greek was inadequate, for instance the allusions to Daniel in Matthew 24 prophesying the end of the age.

The Hebrew and the Aramaic word for King is the same - *Melek*, hence perhaps the confusion over the inscription on the cross. To use either language would have put Jesus alongside Saul, David, Solomon, the hereditary kings of Israel. But

who invented the title 'King of the Jews'? After all, the ancient hereditary kings were 'Kings of Israel'.

It came as a shock to me to discover that the later title was coined in Rome. Herod the Great, whose ancestry was not even Jewish, fled to Rome after a little local difficulty. It was the Romans who created the title 'King of the Jews' for him, then sent him back to rule for them in Palestine. Unfortunately he was such a monster that they divided his kingdom amongst his sons, so the title effectively became vacant, only to reappear in the account of Passiontide.¹ So why did Pilate refuse to allow the 'self-styled' addition to the inscription on the cross, and why did he and Herod the Tetrarch become friends behind the scenes from that time on?

Unfortunately these questions are not cliff-hangers to be resolved in the next episode. They remain to tease us, and to make the Bible as vibrant and controversial as anything in the news today. If it was all cut and dried, like the contemporary official statements on Afghanistan, it would have disappeared into obscurity years ago. With Afghanistan, we depend on those brave individual war reporters for turning the statistics of war into the pain of reality, and novels such as Khaled Hosseini's brilliant *A thousand splendid suns* to gain an idea of what it feels like to live there. It is the unanswered questions and the discrepancies in the Gospels that tell me the accounts we have were written from personal witness and conviction, and the fact that they have not been sanitised by the church in the succeeding millennia suggests to me that the underlying truths have been more powerful than any editorial pen. But I have also learned to try to imagine the scenes recounted in the Bible in the correct contexts, and that includes language.

I just hope young Harriet of the novel doesn't now stick up her hand in Sunday school and ask why the inscription on the cross was INRI when Jesus begins with a 'J'!

¹ ..and it was used by the three wise men.

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