

What do the letters “INRI” on the crucifix mean?



Pilate also had an inscription written and put on the cross. It read, “Jesus the Nazorean, the King of the Jews.” Now many of the Jews read this inscription, because the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city; and it was written in Hebrew, Latin, and Greek. So the chief priests of the Jews said to Pilate, “Do not write ‘The King of the Jews,’ but that he said, ‘I am the King of the Jews.’” Pilate answered, “What I have written, I have written.”

John 19:19-22 (RNAB)

Latin was the official language of the Roman Empire in Jesus’ time and we know from both scriptural and historical texts, Israel during Jesus’ life, death and resurrection was under Roman occupation.

It was common for the Roman officials to hang a “titulus” or sign above the crucified person to indicate the charges against them. As noted above, scripture says that Pilate put the charges in Latin, Greek and Hebrew, so all entering the Holy City could read it.

Pilate placed this title above Jesus in scorn and mockery of the Pharisees and Sadducees, rather than a pledge of Christian faith. He likely knew it would irritate the Jewish leaders, which it did. Yet even in his ridicule, Pilate spoke truth: Jesus is King, not of the Jews only, but of all things.

The words written and put on the cross above Jesus’ head were:

“Iesvs Nazarenvs Rex Ivdæorvm.”

Latin uses “I” instead of the English “J”, and “V” instead of “U” (i.e., Jesus Nazarenus Rex Judæorum). The English translation is "Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews."

The Early Church adopted the first letters of each word of this inscription “INRI” as a symbol. Throughout the centuries INRI has appeared in many paintings and statues of the crucifixion.