

THE NAZARETH INSCRIPTION: PROOF OF THE RESURRECTION OF CHRIST?

By Clyde E. Billington, Ph.D.

An Abridgement of an Original Two Part Article

INTRODUCTION

The Nazareth Inscription is a Greek inscription on a white marble tablet measuring approximately 24 inches by 15 inches. The exact time and place of its discovery are not known. In 1878 it became an addition to the private Froehner Collection of ancient inscriptions and manuscripts, but the details of its acquisition are unknown.

Froehner's inventory of this Inscription simply states: "This marble was sent from Nazareth in 1878." This is all that is known about the time and place of its discovery. (Cumont 241-242, Zelueta 1-2) While Froehner did make a Greek miniscule transcription of the original Greek uncial version of the Nazareth Inscription, he never published either the miniscule or the uncial version, and the contents of the Nazareth Inscription remained unknown to the scholarly world for more than fifty years.

In 1925 the Froehner Collection was acquired by the Paris National Library, where the Nazareth Inscription was rediscovered and read by M. Rostovtzeff. Rostovtzeff told his friend, the French scholar M. Franz Cumont about this Inscription in the Paris National Library. (Cumont 241-242) With the encouragement of Rostovtzeff, Cumont published a Greek transcription and a translation of the Nazareth Inscription with a commentary in his article *Un Rescrit Imperial Sur La Violation De Sepulture* in the French journal *Reveu Historique*, CLXII, in 1930.

The Nazareth Inscription took the scholarly world by storm because, as will be seen, it can be read as an imperial edict against the Apostles stealing Christ's body from His tomb and faking His resurrection. It is also very similar to the Jewish high-priestly version of the resurrection of Christ as found in Matthew 28:11-15, in other words, "His Disciples stole His body from His tomb and faked his resurrection."

Cumont's publication of the Nazareth Inscription led to a snowstorm of scholarly articles; more than twenty were published by the end of 1932. None of these early articles questioned the authenticity of the Nazareth Inscription. It is highly unlikely that it is a forgery. As will be seen, the Greek text of this Inscription and its historical connections provide strong support for its authenticity. However, its interpretation and possible connection to the story of the resurrection of Christ are still hotly debated today.

The purpose of this paper is to determine if the Nazareth Inscription is an imperial response to the story of the resurrection of Christ. While the views and opinions of key modern scholars will at times be discussed, it is not the intent of this study to do reviews or critiques of the many articles written on the Nazareth Inscription.

While there are several English translations available of the Nazareth Inscription (Zulueta 184-185; Brown 2-3), I disagree with them on the translation of a few key Greek words and phrases, and I have for this reason chosen to provide my own translation below.

THE NAZARETH INSCRIPTION TRANSLATION

By Clyde E. Billington, Ph.D.

1. **EDICT OF CAESAR**
2. It is my decision [concerning] graves and tombs --whoever has made
3. them for the religious observances of parents, or children, or household
4. members --that these remain undisturbed forever. But if anyone legally
5. charges that another person has destroyed, or has in any manner extracted
6. those who have been buried, or has moved with wicked intent those who
7. have been buried to other places, committing a crime against them, or has
8. moved sepulcher-sealing stones, against such a person I order that a
9. judicial tribunal be created, just as [is done] concerning the gods in
10. human religious observances, even more so will it be obligatory to treat
11. with honor those who have been entombed. You are absolutely not to
12. allow anyone to move [those who have been entombed]. But if
13. [someone does], I wish that [violator] to suffer capital punishment under
14. the title of tomb-breaker.

NOTES AND COMMENTARY ON MY TRANSLATION

While the Greek word “edict” (“diatagma”) used in line one¹ of the Nazareth Inscription may suggest to modern readers some sort of imperial legal process, the fact of the matter is that the Nazareth Inscription is almost certainly a rump or abridged version of an imperial rescript. A rescript was a letter of response sent by the emperor to an imperial official who had earlier written a letter to him about some problem. Incidentally, the Greek verb “diatageuo” (“I order”) and its related noun “diatage,” (“a command”), from which the Greek word diatagma is derived, are used many times in ancient Greek texts, but diatagma rarely appears. My research indicates that there are less than a dozen usages of the word diatagma that appear in all of existing ancient texts, and counting the Nazareth Inscription, two of these are by the Emperor Claudius.

Liddell and Scott’s unabridged *Greek-English Lexicon* p. 415 lists only eight ancient

¹ The line numbers used for my translation match the line numbers of the original Greek text.

appearances of “diatagma,” and one of these is in the New Testament in Hebrews 11:23, which reads “diatagma tou basileos” (“edict of the king”) and which is very similar to the “Diatagma Kaisaros” (Edict of Caesar) on the Nazareth Inscription. Since this word is so rarely used in ancient texts, a question thus arises: Had the author of Hebrews seen the Nazareth Inscription?

It was fairly common for imperial rescripts to be treated as legal edicts. See Charlesworth, *Documents Illustrating the Reigns of Claudius and Nero*, p. 14 where the Emperor Claudius himself calls one of his rescripts on Jewish rights “touto mou to diatagma” or “this edict of mine.” As will be seen below, there is an imperial rescript of the Emperor Claudius, which fits the pattern and vocabulary of the Nazareth Inscription very well.

F. de Zulueta, in his 1932 article *Violation of Sepulture in Palestine at the Beginning of the Christian Era*, p. 184, and Frank E. Brown in his 1952 article *Violation of Sepulture in Palestine*, p. 2 both translate the Greek phrase “threskeian progonon” in line 3 of my translation as “cult of their ancestors;” thereby suggesting that the Nazareth Inscription fits best in a pagan Greco-Roman context, where religious rituals were performed at graves by relatives.

However, the word “threskeian” is best translated as “religious observance.” It is used five times in two known imperial rescripts dealing with the Jewish religion. [Charlesworth, *Documents*, pp. 5, 14, 15]. It is also used in this same way for the Jewish religion by the Jewish historian Josephus [*AJ*, 17.9.3]. In addition, this same Greek word [“threskeian”] is used several times in the New Testament as related to Christianity, see Acts 26:5, James 1:26-27, and Col. 2:18. The Greek word “threskeian” therefore does not necessarily suggest pagan religion and can best be translated as “religious observance” or even simply as “religion.”

Lines 3 and 4 assume the existence of family tombs where only dead bodies --not the ashes of cremated humans in urns-- were placed. It should also be noted that there is nothing in this edict which assumes or states that the ashes of the cremated dead had been moved, lost, or scattered, or that funeral urns had been moved, destroyed, or stolen.

This edict also does not mention corpses or funeral urns being dug up out of the ground. Inhumation or burial in the ground in cemeteries was for both corpses and funeral urns with human ashes the most-common gentile method of burial in the Roman Empire. The majority of the burials in the gentile areas the Roman Empire in the First Century AD were by cremation and the inhumation of funeral urns with ashes; only slightly less common was inhumation or the burial of corpses in the ground.

Gentile burials in the early Roman Empire, for both corpses and urns, were almost always in individual graves in cemeteries, and not in family tombs. Only a few of the very wealthy were buried in mausoleum-style tombs, and even these mausoleum-style tombs were only for very important, rich individuals, and almost never for family burials. There are no known examples of family, rolling-stone tombs, like those in Second Temple Period Israel, to be found among the other ethnic groups in the Roman Empire. Jewish family “kok” tombs commonly had rolling stones or sealing stones in front of their entrances as was the case for the tomb of Christ.

The fact that there were no gentile burials in rolling-stone tombs in the ancient Roman world strongly suggests that the Nazareth Inscription was written for Jews and/ or Jewish Christians and not for pagan gentiles. Incidentally, catacombs were nothing more than underground cemeteries, and they too were not divided into true family tombs.

The Greek phrase *doloi poneroi* in line 6 “with wicked intent” is almost certainly the equivalent of the Latin *cuius dolo malo*, which is found in later Roman law [see Justinian’s *Digest* 47.12.3]. The Latin “*cuius dolo malo*” is normally translated as: “by someone’s evil design.” However, Zulueta renders this Greek phrase “*doloi poneroi*” by the adverb

“maliciously” in his translation of the Nazareth Inscription. [Zulueta, 185] Frank E. Brown in his translation in his *Violation of Sepulture in Palestine*, p. 2 renders this same Greek phrase as “with malice aforethought.” Brown’s translation is better than Zulueta’s, but still does not give the full sense of what is being said.

The entire Greek phrase in line 6 reads as “eis heterous topous **doloi poneroi** metatetheikota. The placement of *doloi poneroi* between *eis heterous topous* (“to other places”) and *metatetheikota* (“has moved”) clearly indicates that it was the moving of dead bodies to other places that was being done “with wicked intent.” In other words, bodies were being moved to perpetrate some sort of a fraud. The proper translation of *doloi poneroi* as “with wicked intent” gives strong support to the conclusion that the Nazareth Inscription was a rescript written in response to the story of the resurrection of Christ, which many Jews and pagan Romans believed was a fraud perpetrated by Christian Jews who had removed the body of Jesus from His tomb.

In line 8 in the Greek text, there is an epsilon “e” [“or”] found between the words “sepulcher sealing [or] stones” “*katoxous e lithous*.” This is almost certainly a (pagan?) scribal error. The Greek words *katoxoi lithoi*, --without the Greek epsilon “e” [“or”] between them-- appears in several other Greek documents and translates as “sepulcher-sealing stones.” It is for this reason that I do not place an “or” between these two words in my translation. Sepulcher-sealing stones were used for Jewish family *kok* tombs and were obviously not used in Greco-Roman style, inhumation burials in graves in the ground.

Even for Jews, the period of time that sepulcher-sealing or rolling stones were used for family tombs in Israel was relatively short, basically lasting less than 200 years and ending with the fall of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. After the fall of Jerusalem, Jews in the Roman Empire buried their dead much like their gentile neighbors, in individual graves in cemeteries. This fact clearly indicates that the Nazareth Inscription had to be issued before 70 A.D.

These Second Temple, Jewish, family tombs of the wealthy with sealing stones are today called “*kok/kokh*” tombs by archaeologists. There is no archaeological or documentary evidence, which indicates that such “*kok*” tombs with their sepulcher-sealing stones were ever used by gentiles in the Roman Empire. This fact strongly suggests that the Nazareth Inscription was written against Nazarene Jews who spread the story that King Jesus Christ has been resurrected from the dead.

I believe that the Greek phrase “*criteron ego keleuo genesthai*” [“I order that a tribunal be created”] found in lines 8-9 indicates that a trial for the crime of “Violation of Sepulcher” was to be treated as a sacrilege crime to be handled by a local religious tribunal. The punishment, however, was to be meted out by temporal Roman officials. It should be noted that both Jesus Christ and the Apostle Paul were put on trial by Jewish religious leaders for sacrilege, and then handed over to or held by Roman officials for possible punishment [John 18:28-33, and Acts 20:28 and 22:30].

Frank Brown in his article *Violation of Sepulture in Palestine*, p. 15 argues that the presence of the word “*gods*” in line 9 indicates that the Nazareth Inscription was written for a pagan audience, probably in the Decapolis. Brown writes of this appearance of the word “*gods*” in the Nazareth Inscription:

“Such an insult to Jewish feeling, an insult calculated to precipitate a general insurrection, was exactly what Roman policy did its utmost to avoid.” p.2.

This statement by Brown is pure nonsense. First, as Josephus clearly states, Gaius Caesar [Caligula] nearly drove the Jews to an armed revolt in 41 AD because of his hubristic edict that his statue be set up for worship as a god in the Jewish Temple. [AJ, XIX.5.1-3] So much for the supposed Roman policy of Roman emperors doing their “utmost to avoid” causing a “general insurrection” of the Jews! And second, there still exists a rescript written to the Jews by the Emperor Claudius which calls Caesar Augustus “the god,” (see Charlesworth, *Documents*, p. 14).

The reference to “gods” in line 9 should be viewed in conjunction with the establishment of the religious tribunal mentioned in lines 8-9. In other words, this imperial rescript is simply saying that, just as religious tribunals were to try criminal cases of religious sacrilege involving the gods, so also such religious tribunals should try cases dealing with the removal of corpses from tombs. In other words, the crime of violation of sepulture was to be handled as a religious crime.

This interpretation is supported by the later *Theodosian Code* 9.17.2 where it is stated that investigations into the crime of “De Sepulchris Violates” in the city of Rome were to be conducted by the judges and “the pontiffs.” [Pharr, 239] That the crime of violation of sepulcher was considered to be a religious crime in Roman law can also be seen in Justinian’s *Digest* 47.12.4 where it is stated: “Sepulchra hostium religiosa nobis non sunt,” [“The sepulchers of enemies are for us not religious”]. In other words, the tombs of enemies could be violated or robbed without religious or legal penalty.

The Greek word used in line 12 “metakeinesai” should be translated as “to move,” i.e. dead bodies. This is strangely not reflected in the translations of Zulueta, “disturb them” [p.159], or Brown “forcibly disturb them” [p. 3]. This sentence in lines 11-12 is simply restating for the second time that dead bodies were not to be removed from tombs. The fact that this warning against the removing of corpses from tombs is repeated for the second time [see lines 5-6] strongly indicates that this was the main reason why this edict was issued, and this fact also strongly suggests that this rescript edict was written as an imperial response to the story of the resurrection of Christ.

It should also be noted that there is no accusation made in the Nazareth Inscription that tombs or bodies were being robbed of valuables, but only that bodies were being moved.² Why would any sane person want to move a body and not rob it? This is very strange, unless one assumes that Claudius had heard from King Herod Agrippa I the Jewish High Priestly version of the resurrection of Christ, i.e. “His disciples stole His body from His tomb and faked His resurrection.”

Lines 13-14 of the Nazareth Inscription impose the death penalty on anyone found guilty of removing bodies from tombs “with wicked intent.” As several modern scholars have noted, there are no other examples in all of Roman law for the use of capital punishment for the crime of breaking into a tomb and removing a dead body.

Generally under Roman law, tomb breaking or robbing was treated as a matter for a civil suit

²There is a reference to the stealing of bodies from tombs in a edict of the Emperor Honorius in 386 A.D. However, the context of this edict makes it very clear that the problem being addressed was the theft of the bodies of Christian saints to be sold as relics. See Clyde Pharr, *The Theodosian Code* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1955, p. 240, code 9.17.6

by the family of the person buried in the violated tomb. See Justinian's *Digest* 47.12, *De sepulchro violato*. Civil fines—and not the death penalty-- could also be imposed on tomb violators as is seen in *The Theodosian Code* 9.17-1-6 [Pharr, 239-240]. However, the context of this law in *The Theodosian Code* indicates that it deals with the destruction of limestone mausoleums—not the moving bodies or the robbing of tombs—and that the looted limestone from mausoleums was being burned into lime for cement.

Justinian's *Digest* 47.12.3.7 does impose the death penalty on anyone who “robs dead bodies” [“cadavera spoliati”] “by armed force” [“manu armata”]; but, with the exception of the Nazareth Inscription, there is no reference in all of Roman law to the death penalty being imposed for breaking into a tomb and removing a dead body. It must be noted that the Nazareth Inscription has absolutely nothing to say about the robbery of tombs or the use of armed force. Ancient peoples did rob tombs, but the stealing of dead bodies from tombs was almost certainly not a problem that normally would have needed to be dealt with by Roman law.

Greco-Roman pagans generally believed that the ghosts of the unburied dead could and would haunt the living. There are many pagan Greco-Roman stories from the ancient world about the living being haunted by ghosts whose bodies or ashes were not properly buried. In other words, besides the unpleasantness of moving a dead body, gentile Greco-Romans would not have wanted to remove a body from a grave or tomb and leave it unburied since it might result in a haunting. Therefore, the provision in the Nazareth Inscription imposing the death penalty for the stealing of dead bodies from tombs does not at all fit a pagan gentile context. It does, however, fit very well with the story of the resurrection of the Jesus Christ.

The Greek word which I translate as “title” in line 14 is “onomati” or “name.” The word “onoma” or “name” was an early Greek substitution for the Latin word “titulus.” The word *titulus* was used in Latin for the written accusation of a crime which was posted at the site where a condemned person was to be executed. See for example the *titulus*: “Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews,” which was posted over Christ's head at His crucifixion.

The Roman practice of posting a *titulus* at an execution site was foreign to the Greek-speaking half of the Roman world, and there was at first no equivalent Greek word to translate the Latin word “*titulus*.” This can even be seen in all three of the synoptic Gospels in the New Testament where the Greek words “aitia” [“legal charge”] and variants of the verb “grapho” [“write”] are used together to describe the *titulus* of Christ, see Matt.27:27, Mark 15:26, Luke 23:38.

However, by the time that the Apostle John wrote his gospel, the Latin word “*titulus*” had become a loan word in the Greek language in the form “*titlos*.” John 19:19 uses the word “*titlos*” for the written charge placed over the head of Christ. The fact that the Nazareth Inscription uses the Greek word “onoma” or “name” and does not use the later Latin loan word “*titlos*” strongly suggests that the Nazareth Inscription was written sometime before the Apostle John wrote his Gospel in the late first century A.D.

In summary, the Nazareth Inscription fits well into a Jewish context where there were family tombs with “sepulcher-sealing stones.” In addition, the fact that dead bodies were being moved “with wicked intent” suggests something unusual was happening. The highly unusual imposition of the death penalty for removing dead bodies from tombs supports this interpretation and also strongly suggests that the Nazareth Inscription was issued to deal with what the Roman emperor saw as a major political problem. I believe that this problem was the new religion of the Nazarenes, which taught that Jesus Christ was the King of the Jews and that He had resurrected from the dead.

The Roman emperor who wrote the Nazareth Inscription --almost certainly Claudius-- probably saw the new Jewish sect of the Nazarenes as a dangerous, anti-Roman religious movement. It should be remembered that Jesus' followers believed that He was the Messiah, the King of the Jews who would eventually rule the world. Roman emperors took a great deal of interest in people who proclaimed themselves kings.

It should come as no surprise that a Roman emperor might want to nip this new religious-political movement in the bud. It should be remembered that the home base of the violent and rebellious Jewish Zealots was located in Galilee, and this may have caused the Emperor Claudius to confuse the new sect of the "Nazarenes" with Jewish Zealots. And it should also be remembered that the first name given to Jewish Christians was "Nazarenes," clearly connecting them to the city of Nazareth in Galilee.

To counter the Nazarene/ Christian teaching that Jesus had been resurrected, the Jewish High Priests claimed that His disciples: "came by night and stole him away." [Matt. 28:3 NASV] It is almost certain that this was the version of the resurrection of Christ, which came to the ears of the Roman Emperor Claudius, who consequently issued the Nazareth Inscription and ordered it posted in the city of Nazareth.³ It was almost certainly the Jewish King Herod Agrippa I, an old and close friend, who informed Claudius about the new dangerous religion of Jesus the Nazarene.

THE DATE OF THE NAZARETH INSCRIPTION

There has been a great deal of scholarly debate about the dating of the Nazareth Inscription. The French scholar M. Franz Cumont, who first published the Nazareth Inscription, dated it between 50 BC and 50 AD. He based his dating of this "Edict" on the style of its epigraphy. [Cumont 265] However, the American scholar Frank E. Brown of Yale University argued: "... that our inscription comes from the decade after the stamping out of the [Jewish] revolt of 132-135 AD." [Brown 19] On the other hand, both Cumont and Prof. F. de Zulueta argued for dating this Inscription in the reign of the Emperor Caesar Augustus, 31 B.C. to 14 A.D. [Cumont 265; Zulueta 186]

M. P. Charlesworth in his book *Documents Illustrating the Reigns of Claudius and Nero* lists the Nazareth Inscription as one issued by Claudius, but writes that it: "...is of doubtful provenance and date, but some scholars ascribe it to Claudius." [Charlesworth 3] It will be argued in this article that textual evidence and historical synchronisms provide strong support for dating the Nazareth Inscription to the early reign of the Emperor Claudius, 41-54 AD, and most likely to the very troubled year of 41 AD.

If the Emperor Claudius was the author of the Nazareth inscription, as this article will argue below, then there are very good reasons for assuming that the original version of the Nazareth Inscription was dictated directly into Greek by Claudius himself. Claudius, while he at times found it necessary to play the part of a fool before he became emperor, was actually a very well-educated man, although apparently weak of will.

³ It is possible that the Nazareth Inscription was originally posted in the city of Sepphoris, a former capital of the Galilee. Sepphoris was located only about five miles from Nazareth, and was the largest city in the Galilee. The exact year when Herod Antipas shifted his capital from Sepphoris to his newly- built city of Tiberias is not known but must have taken place during or just before the ministry of Christ.

Suetonius in his *The Lives of the Caesars* writes of the Emperor Claudius that he: "...even wrote historical works in Greek, twenty books of Etruscan History and eight of Carthaginian." [Suetonius, vol. II, 77] In addition, Suetonius states that Claudius as emperor held court in both

Latin and Greek, depending on the language of the person speaking to him. [Suetonius ii, 77] Claudius was unquestionably fluent in Greek, and it is nearly certain that, when Claudius dictated official rescript letters for the Greek-speaking, eastern half of the Roman Empire, he dictated them in Greek. This fact is important for matching the Greek vocabulary used in the Nazareth Inscription with that used in other of Claudius' known rescripts in Greek.

The Greek title on the Nazareth Inscription calls it a "Diatagma Kaisaros" or "Edict of Caesar." In other words, the Nazareth Inscription is an imperial rescript, which had the force of law. However, it should be noted that rescripts were often local in their scope, and that they frequently dealt with unusual legal, religious, or political issues, which had arisen in a specific city or province.

The Jewish historian Josephus provides one rescript letter of Claudius in which the Emperor protected Jewish rights throughout the entire Roman Empire. This rescript letter is given by Josephus in Greek, and it is nearly certain that he found it written in Greek in the imperial chancellery. This rescript has many significant connections to the Nazareth Inscription and for this reason, I have translated it in its entirety below.

Tiberius Claudius Caesar Augustus, Pontifex Maximus, Tribune, Twice-Elected Consul states: King Agrippa and Herod⁴, persons dear to me, have asked that I assent to guaranteeing the same rights to the Jews in all the areas under Roman rule, as has been done for those Jews living in Alexandria. Not only do I happily grant this request to those who have asked me, but [I do so] also because I am convinced that [King Agrippa and Herod] are worthy [of having their request granted] and because of their loyalty to and love for the Romans. I especially determine it to be just that no Greek city deny [to the Jews] these same rights, since they were guaranteed to them by the god [Caesar] Augustus. It is therefore fitting that the Jews, in all [parts] of the world ruled by us, be unhindered in observing their ancestral [religious] customs. I also now command [the Jews] that they make use of this my generosity to them in the most reasonable manner [possible] and that they not show contempt for the religious beliefs of other ethnic groups, [but rather] that they obey their own [religious] laws. I also order that the leaders of cities, colonies, and municipalities,⁵ both inside and outside of Italy --including kings and dynastic governors, through their own officials-- have this my edict [diatagma] engraved [on a stone tablet] and posted outdoors for not less than 30 days in a public place where it can be easily read from paved ground. [Charlesworth, 14; Josephus, AJ, XIX, 5, 3]⁶

⁴ In Louis H. Feldman's translation of Josephus' *Jewish Antiquities* he translates the Greek phrase "basileos Agrippa kai Herodou" as "Kings Agrippa and Herod." [Feldman vol. ix, 351] However, in the Greek text the word "basileos" is in the genitive singular and must go only with the name of Agrippa, and not with that of Herod. It appears that Herod had not yet been made the king of Chalcis at the time that this rescript was issued. Josephus states in *The Antiquities of the Jews* that the Emperor Claudius made Herod king of Chalcis at the request of his brother Agrippa. [AJ xix.277] Agrippa I was both the full brother of this Herod and also his father-in-law. Agrippa I's daughter Bernice was his brother Herod's wife. It was this same Bernice along with her full brother Agrippa II, who heard the Apostle Paul, see Acts 25:23. This Bernice was to go on to later fame as the lover of the future Emperor Titus.

It should be noted that the above rescript was called by Claudius a “diatagma” or an “edict,” and that it was to be engraved in stone and publicly posted, just as was also almost certainly done for the Nazareth Inscription. It is very likely that when this edict on Jewish rights was posted, it was posted in an abridged version. There would be no reason to include the portions of this letter referring to the titles of Claudius or mentioning Agrippa I and his younger brother Herod in the publicly posted version of this edict.

It should also be noted, in the rescript on Jewish rights above, that even kings and dynastic governors were ordered by Claudius to post this edict. This fact destroys the assumptions and consequent arguments used by Frank E. Brown to date the Nazareth Inscription. Brown’s dating of the Nazareth Inscription [mid 2nd century AD] was largely based on his assumption that the Nazareth Inscription was an imperial edict and that it therefore could not have been written during the rule of any Jewish king over Galilee. Brown writes:

“In the realms of such kings, created and upheld in independence by the emperor and the senate for the purpose of securing the frontiers, no constitution of the emperor was valid.” [Brown 14]

Brown’s assumption is clearly false, and his consequent arguments for dating the Nazareth Inscription are faulty and unreliable. The Emperor Claudius in the above rescript clearly gives orders directly to “kings and dynastic governors.” This rescript letter of Claudius was available to Brown in Josephus’ *Antiquities of the Jews*, and he should have read it and also other passages in Josephus, where Josephus clearly states that the Roman governor of Syria had authority over all the kings and dynasts in his province, including the Jewish King Herod Agrippa I. It should also be noted that earlier when Caligula demanded in 41 AD that his image be placed in the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem, he ordered Petronius, the governor of Syria, to make it happen.

THE DATING OF THE NAZARETH INSCRIPTION BY ITS TEXT

The Nazareth Inscription contains words and grammatical structures, which are very similar to those found in several other Greek rescripts of the Emperor Claudius, especially those which in some way deal with the Jews. For example, of the 90 words used in the Nazareth Inscription, there are only 14 Greek words or phrases that are not found in other known rescripts of the Emperor Claudius, and nearly all of these words deal with the specifics of the reason for which this rescript was written, i.e. breaking into tombs, stealing dead bodies, and moving them to other places.

⁵ Both the Greek words colony “kolonion” and municipality “mounikipion” are clear Latinisms. This, however, does not prove that this rescript was originally composed in Latin and then translated into Greek.

⁶ Translated from the Greek text provided by M. P. Charlesworth, in his *Documents illustrating the Reigns of Claudius and Nero*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1952, p. 14, document 15.

A number of similar phrases are also used in both the Nazareth Inscription and other rescripts of the Emperor Claudius, as the following chart illustrates:

NAZARETH INSCRIPTION	OTHER RESCRIPTS OF CLAUDIUS
Diatagma Kaisaros [Edict of Caesar]	mou to diatagma ⁷ [my edict]
threskeias anthropon] [religious observances of men]	patrion threskeian ⁸ [paternal religious observance]
keleuo.....medeni [I order that..... to no one]	keleuo meden ⁹ [I order that nothing]
kathaper peri theon [just as concerning gods]	kathaper ek progonon [just as from parents]
mallon xre to alethes eipein [moreover it is required to tell the truth]	mallon deesei tous kekedeumevous timan [moreover it is necessary to honor the dead]

This is only a partial list but it does serve to illustrate that the Nazareth Inscription fits very well with the vocabulary and style of the rescripts of the Emperor Claudius.

As was noted above, both Cumont and Prof. F. de Zulueta argue for dating this Inscription in the reign of the Emperor Caesar Augustus, 31 B.C. to 14 AD [Cumont 265; Zulueta 186]. However, the use of the phrase “Edict of Caesar” strongly argues for a later period than Caesar Augustus, in other words to a slightly later period when the name “Caesar” had become established as a synonym for Emperor, just as it is used in the New Testament by both Jesus and the Jews. Incidentally, Caesar Augustus was very careful about including the senate when he issued edicts, and the Nazareth Inscription does not mention the Roman Senate.

In summation, the Nazareth Inscription is almost certainly a rump version of an imperial rescript, which was issued by the Emperor Claudius for posting in a public place in Nazareth. The context of the Nazareth Inscription clearly proves that it was written for Jews and not gentiles, and that it was almost certainly issued by Claudius in response to the story of the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews. As will be argued below, it is highly likely that the Nazareth Inscription was inscribed in 41 AD at the instigation of the Jewish King Herod Agrippa I.

THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF THE NAZARETH INSCRIPTION

The textual evidence strongly suggests that the Nazareth Inscription was written by the Emperor Claudius, and he had an excellent source of knowledge of all events that were

⁷ Charlesworth, *Documents*, p. 14. This phrase is used twice in other rescripts of Claudius.

⁸ Charlesworth, *Documents*, pp. 14-15. This identical phrase is used three times in other rescripts of Claudius.

⁹ Charlesworth, *Documents*, p. 5.

happening in Israel, and especially what was happening in Israel as related to the development of Christianity. This source was the Jewish King Herod Agrippa I.

Herod Agrippa I was a childhood friend of Claudius, and he was also a close personal friend of Claudius' predecessor and nephew, the Emperor Caligula. As will be seen, Herod Agrippa I also had an extensive knowledge of Christ and of early Christianity. King Herod Agrippa I was almost certainly the one who motivated the Emperor Claudius to issue the Nazareth Inscription in response to the story of the resurrection of King Jesus Christ.

When Claudius became emperor in 41 AD, he was faced with a revolt by nearly all the Jews in the Roman Empire. The previous Emperor Gaius [Caligula], his nephew, had driven the Jews to the brink of an armed revolt by his insistence that his statue be placed for worship in the Temple in Jerusalem. [Josephus, AJ, xviii.8.2]¹⁰ Only the timely assassination of Caligula and the wisdom of Petronius, the governor of Syria, who delayed implementing Caligula's command, prevented war in 41 AD between the Jews and the Romans.

Claudius knew the dangerous Jewish situation very well, not only because of his imperial connections, but also because of his long friendship with the Jewish King Herod Agrippa I. Agrippa had been raised and educated by the imperial Julio-Claudian family in Rome. Josephus writes: "Agrippa had been brought up with Claudius and his circle." [Josephus, AJ, xviii.6.4, vol. II, 107]. Josephus continues:

Shortly before the death of King Herod [the Great], Agrippa was living in Rome. He was brought up with and was on very familiar terms with Drusus, the son of the emperor Tiberius. He also won the friendship of Antonia,¹¹ the wife of Drusus the Elder (the brother of Tiberius), for his (Agrippa's) mother Bernice ranked high among Antonia's friends and had requested her to promote her son's interest. [Josephus, AJ, xviii.6.1, vol. II, 95-97]

Antonia, whom Josephus mentions in this passage, was the mother of Claudius and the grandmother of Caligula. She was also the daughter of Mark Antony and his wife Octavia, the sister of Caesar Augustus. In addition, she was the wife of the Emperor Tiberius' brother, Drusus the Elder. She had two sons, the popular general Germanicus and the future Emperor Claudius. Her deceased son Germanicus was the father of the future Emperor Caligula. In other words, Agrippa had as a friend the most powerful and influential woman in Rome, as well as being friends with her son Claudius and her grandson Caligula, both of whom would become Roman emperors.

¹⁰ Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, trans. by Louis H. Feldman (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965), vol. II, pp. 155-157.

¹¹ Antonia was the daughter of Mark Antony and his wife, Octavia, the sister of Caesar Augustus. She was married to Drusus the Elder, the brother of the Emperor Tiberius. Claudius and Germanicus were her sons, and Caligula, the son of Germanicus, was her grandson. The widow Antonia was known for her integrity, and she was clearly the most powerful woman in Rome at the time. It was Antonia who told Tiberius of Sejanus' plot to kill him. Tiberius, her brother-in-law, gave her almost anything that she wanted, although it was almost certainly Tiberius who poisoned her son Germanicus out of envy for his popularity with the Roman People.

Tiberius died in 37 AD, and his grandnephew Caligula became the new emperor. Shortly afterwards the Emperor Caligula summoned Agrippa to his palace, and “put a diadem on his head and appointed him king of the tetrarchy of [his deceased uncle] Philip, presenting Agrippa also with the tetrarchy of Lysanias.” [Josephus, AJ, xviii.6.10; vol. II, 143]

Caligula’s crowning of Agrippa as a king was to have major consequences for the career of the Tetrarch Herod Antipas, who is famous for events in the New Testament. Jealous of his nephew Agrippa’s new Roman title of king and nagged by his wife Herodias, who earlier had had her daughter Salome ask for the head of John the Baptist, the Tetrarch Herod Antipas petitioned the Emperor Caligula to also make him a king like his nephew and rival Agrippa.

However, the ambitious King Herod Agrippa I, seeking revenge for earlier insults by Antipas, sent letters and emissaries to Caligula and accused Herod Antipas of treason and of plotting a revolt against Rome with the support of the Parthian Persians. As proof Agrippa said that Antipas had enough weapons stored in Galilee to arm 70 thousand soldiers. [Josephus, AJ, xviii, 7.2, vol. II, 140]

As a result of Agrippa’s false accusations, the Emperor Caligula removed Antipas as tetrarch of Galilee and gave Galilee to his nephew Agrippa in 37 AD. Antipas and Herodias were sent into exile to the city of Lyon in Gaul [France]. Agrippa was now the king of all of northern Israel, including the area of the Galilee where the city of Nazareth was located

When the Emperor Caligula was assassinated and his uncle Claudius became the new emperor in 41 AD, King Agrippa happened to be visiting the city of Rome. While there he played a key role in Claudius’ ascent to the throne. It was Agrippa who was put in charge of preparing Gaius’ dead body for cremation. At that time there were a number of Roman senators who wanted to restore the old Roman Republic and did not want Claudius or anyone else as an emperor. Meanwhile Claudius needed more time to shore up his support.

To buy time and to keep Claudius’ opponents off balance, Herod Agrippa lied and announced to the Senate that Caligula was only in a coma and was not yet dead. It was also a later speech by Agrippa, which helped to convince the Roman senate not to go to war with Claudius in an attempt to re-establish a republic in Rome. [Josephus, AJ, xix.iv. 5-6, vol. II, 325-341]

Claudius therefore owed much to his childhood friend King Herod Agrippa I. Once he had secured the imperial throne, Josephus writes that Claudius rewarded his good friend King Herod Agrippa I for his important help in making him the next emperor.

He also added to Agrippa’s dominions all of the lands that had been ruled by King Herod [the Great], namely Judea and Samaria. He [Claudius] restored these lands to him as a debt due to his belonging to the family of Herod. [Josephus, AJ, xix.v.1, vol. II, 341-343]

It was also Agrippa’s appointment as king of Judah by Claudius, which had helped calm the near armed revolt of the Jews in 41 AD over Caligula’s earlier attempt to set up his statue for worship in the Jewish Temple.

All of this to say, Claudius almost certainly relied on Agrippa for information on the new Jewish religious sect of the Nazarene Christians. There is no doubt that Claudius had heard about Nazarenes from some well-informed source. That source was almost certainly his childhood friend, the Jewish King Herod Agrippa I, and as will be seen below, Agrippa knew Jesus Christ and the Christians very well.

KING HEROD AGRIPPA I AND EARLY CHRISTIANITY

Herod Agrippa I was born in ca. 10 BC and was educated in Rome by the Julio-Claudian family. As a spoiled young prince growing up and then living in Rome, Agrippa wasted his money on riotous living. Deeply in debt and no longer able to afford to live in the city of Rome, Agrippa returned to Israel in 29 AD.

Meanwhile, probably earlier in 29 AD, Herod Antipas, on his way to visit Rome, met his attractive niece Herodias, the wife of his half brother Philip, and fell in love with her. Herodias agreed to marry Antipas, but only if he divorced his Nabatean wife, to whom he had been married for many years.

When Antipas' Nabatean wife learned of Antipas' promise to Herodias, she was furious and fled to her father, King Aretas IV of Petra. Aretas in anger declared war on Antipas. Probably in late 29 or early 30 AD, Aretas crushed the army of Antipas, who was then forced to ask the Emperor Tiberius for Roman forces to fight Aretas. According to Josephus,¹² it was shortly before his loss to Aretas that Antipas had the head of John the Baptist cut-off at the request of the insecure Herodias. [Josephus xviii.5.2, vol. II, 81-83] This on-and-off-again war with Aretas IV would last until Antipas lost his tetrarchy in 37 A.D.

As was noted above, Herod Agrippa I, the full brother of Herodias, returned in poverty from Rome to Israel in 29 AD. Herodias convinced her new husband Herod Antipas to appoint her brother Agrippa to a governmental position in Galilee, an area that Antipas then ruled. Antipas appointed Agrippa as the new "commissioner of markets" in his newly-built, capital city of Tiberias, which is located along the western shore of the Sea of Galilee. [Josephus, AJ, xviii.6.1-3, vol. II. 99-103]

John the Baptist had already started his ministry by that time, and Jesus Christ would begin His ministry in Galilee in ca. 30 AD. In other words, Herod Agrippa was living in the city of Tiberias at the very time that Christ began His ministry in the Galilee. Agrippa would certainly have also known about John the Baptist; Agrippa had a very good source of information in his sister Herodias, who hated John for undermining her position as the wife of Antipas.

It is clear from the New Testament that Herod Antipas, who then ruled the Galilee, had also heard much about Jesus. Luke 23:8 states that Antipas had heard about Jesus "for a long time."

Now Herod was very glad when he saw Jesus; for he had wanted to see him for a long time, because he had been hearing about Him and was hoping to see some sign performed by Him. [NASV]

If Herod Antipas had heard about Jesus "for a long time" then it is certain that both Herodias and her brother Agrippa had also heard about Jesus "for a long time."

While Herod Antipas loved his beautiful new wife Herodias, he and his nephew/ brother-in-law Agrippa hated one another. Antipas seems to have enjoyed insulting his employee Agrippa

¹² There are good reasons for believing that Josephus' report of the beheading of John the Baptist is authentic. The fact that Josephus blames Antipas' defeat by King Aretas on his murder of John the Baptist makes it highly unlikely that this story was added to Josephus' text by a later Christian writer. It is unlikely that a later Christian writer would have known of the war between Antipas and Aretas. The author of this portion of the *Antiquities of the Jews* was very familiar with the political situation which existed at the time of the execution of John the Baptist.

and to have constantly reminded him of his dependency and poverty. Agrippa appears to have endured these insults for years.

Eventually the two men had a major confrontation, and the insulted Agrippa quit his job with Antipas and returned to Rome. The date of Agrippa's departure for Rome is not given by Josephus, but historical sources indicate that Agrippa had only been living in Rome for a few years when Tiberius died in 37 A.D. This would place Agrippa's arrival in Rome in either 34 or 35 AD.

It is very likely that the reason why Agrippa picked this particular time to clash with Antipas and to go to Rome was the death of his uncle, and Antipas' brother, Philip the Tetrarch of Ituraea, who died in 34 AD.¹³ It is also almost certain that Agrippa hoped that by going to Rome, he might receive Philip's tetrarchy from his good friend Caligula, who was heir to the Imperial throne. Everyone knew that the Emperor Tiberius was old and in ill health.

It is likely that Christ was crucified in 33 AD. Since Agrippa did not return to Rome until 34 AD, then he must have been living at Tiberias during the entire period of the ministry of Jesus Christ. When Tiberius died in 37 AD, the new Emperor Caligula almost immediately made Agrippa the new king of Ituraea, and then later that same year, after deposing Herod Antipas from his tetrarchy for supposed treason, Caligula also gave Galilee and Peraea to Agrippa. Peraea was located in what is today the northern half of the modern nation of Jordan. From late 37 to early 41 AD King Herod Agrippa I ruled Galilee, spending much of his time in his capital cities of Tiberias and Sepphoris.

As was discussed earlier, in 41 AD the new Emperor Claudius gave King Herod Agrippa I the additional areas of Judea and Samaria. King Agrippa I then ruled all of the territory that his grandfather Herod the Great had once ruled. However, his rule over a united Israel was to last only three years. Shortly after being given Judea in 41 AD, King Herod Agrippa I went to Jerusalem, and he immediately began to persecute Christian Jews.¹⁴

King Herod Agrippa I killed the Apostle James and arrested the Apostle Peter. [Acts 12:1-3] It is even possible that Agrippa used the Nazareth Inscription Edict as his authorization to kill James. Shortly after these events, the hubristic Agrippa suddenly died in the city of Caesarea in 44 AD being "eaten by worms." [Acts 12:23] It is highly likely that the Nazareth Inscription dates to the early period of Agrippa's persecution of Christians in Jerusalem, and most likely 41 AD when the Jews were near an armed revolt against Rome. It is nearly certain that it was Agrippa who told Claudius about Jesus Christ and the Christians.

¹³ On the date of the death of Philip the Tetrarch in the 20th year [i.e. 34 AD] of the reign of Tiberias, see Josephus, AJ, xviii.4.6, vol. II, 75-77.

¹⁴ King Agrippa I was very popular with the Jews. He had reconstructed the kingdom of Herod the Great and had also obtained from the Romans the right of control over the garments of the High Priest. The control of these garments by Roman governors had long been a sore point for years with the Jews. Herod was also popular because he had not only used his influence to protect the rights of the Jews in Alexandria and the rest of the Roman Empire, but he was also the grandson of Mariamme the Hasmonean. In other words, he had the blood of the Maccabees flowing in his veins.

That Claudius knew about Christ can be seen in a passage from Suetonius' *Life of Claudius* where it is stated: "Since the Jews constantly made disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus, he [Claudius] expelled them from Rome." [Suetonius, Claud. xxv. Vol. II, 53]. Chrestus is just an early alternate spelling for Christus, or Christ. The expulsion of the Jews from Rome is referred to in the New Testament in Acts 18:2 where the Jewish Christians Aquila and Priscilla are said to have been expelled from Rome by the Emperor Claudius. The exact date of the expulsion of the Jews from Rome is unknown, but it was almost certainly several years after the death of Herod Agrippa I in 44 AD.

Not only the imperial family but also the entire Roman world seems to have known that the Jews were expecting the coming of their Messiah King. The Roman historian Suetonius in his *Life of Vespasian* states that the main cause of the Jewish Revolt, which led to the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in 70 AD, was a belief among the Jews that they were destined to rule the world. Suetonius writes:

"There had spread over all the Orient an old and established belief that it was fated at that time for men coming from Judaea to rule the world." [Suetonius, Vesp. iv. vol. ii, 280-282]

A key phrase in this quote from Suetonius is "at that time" ["eo tempore"]. In other words, there was a Jewish belief that a Jewish Empire was destined "at that time" to replace the Roman Empire. Suetonius continues on to say that it was this belief which was the direct cause of the Jewish Revolt in 66-70 AD.¹⁵ Suetonius wrote *his Lives of the Caesars* in ca. 100 AD.

The belief that the Jews would rule the world was directly connected to the Jewish belief in the coming of the Messiah/ Christ, who would establish a worldwide Jewish Empire on the earth that would replace the Roman Empire. This was exactly what the Qumran Essenes taught, as can be seen in the *War Scroll* in the Dead Sea Scrolls.

It is nearly certain that this element of Jewish eschatology was known not only to the Emperor Vespasian as Suetonius reports, but also earlier to the Emperor Claudius. It is very likely that the source of Claudius' knowledge on Jewish religion was again King Herod Agrippa I. Any emperor who heard about the Jewish belief that they would rule the world could not help but be alarmed at the appearance of a Jewish Messiah/ King whose followers claimed had resurrected from the dead.

CONCLUSION

The Nazareth Inscription is almost certainly authentic, and it is a rump version of an imperial rescript. It was also almost certainly issued by the Emperor Claudius and most likely in 41 AD when the Jews were in turmoil and right after he had given Judah and Samaria to King Herod Agrippa I. The text of the Nazareth Inscription fits both the vocabulary, style and structure of other known rescripts of Claudius.

¹⁵ The Jewish historian Josephus, on the other hand, blamed the Jewish revolt on the greedy, evil Roman procurator Florus. Josephus also heaped blame for the war on the Jewish Sicari or Zealots, but he basically argued that it was the corrupt Procurator Florus, a Nero appointee, who caused the Jewish War. It should be noted that nowhere in his writings does Josephus mention the Jewish belief that "men from Judaea" would rule the world as a cause of the Jewish War.

As was seen above, Agrippa I was a governmental official in the city of Tiberias in the Galilee when both John the Baptist and Jesus Christ were ministering in Israel. Agrippa's uncle Herod Antipas certainly knew that Jesus was a Galilean from Nazareth, [Luke 23:5-7] and King Agrippa I also must have known this.

The close connection between the name of Jesus and the city of Nazareth is important for determining the place where the Nazareth Edict was posted. A careful look at the New Testament reveals that the followers of Jesus were at first not called Christians but rather "Nazarenes." The Apostle Paul when he appeared before the Roman Governor Felix was accused by his Jewish enemies of being: "...a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes." [Acts 24:5 NASV]

It is also very clear in the New Testament that Jesus during his ministry was primarily called "Jesus of Nazareth." There are many references in the New Testament to "Jesus of Nazareth" or "Jesus the Nazarene." These references are made by both His followers and His enemies. Everyone who had heard of Jesus knew that he was from Nazareth. The titulus, which Pilate placed over the head of Jesus on the cross, read "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews." [John 19:19] When Peter appeared before the High Priest and the Sanhedrin in Acts 4:10, he spoke of: "Jesus Christ the Nazarene, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead."

Unquestionably, King Herod Agrippa I, who was related to the family of the high priests, would have known that Jesus was from the city of Nazareth in Galilee, and that his Disciples were claiming that he had been resurrected. That King Agrippa I was well acquainted with Christianity can also be seen in his behavior after Claudius added Judea to his kingdom in 41 AD. As soon as he returned from Rome in 41 AD to claim Judea, one of the first things that King Agrippa I did was to persecute Christians in the city of Jerusalem, his new capital.

It is nearly certain that it was King Herod Agrippa I who wrote the letter of inquiry to the Emperor Claudius about how to deal with the new "sect" of Jesus the Nazarene. It is also nearly certain that it was in response to Agrippa's letter of inquiry that Claudius wrote an imperial rescript forbidding the removal of bodies from tombs in order to counter the Christian doctrine that Jesus had been resurrected from the dead.

It is also nearly certain that it was King Herod Agrippa I who, through his influence on Claudius, had the Nazareth Inscription posted in Nazareth, the home city of the "sect of the Nazarenes." As was noted above, King Herod Agrippa I may have even used the Nazareth Inscription as imperial authorization for the persecution of Christians and the execution of James the brother of John, see Acts.12:1-3.

The best date for the posting of the Nazareth Inscription is 41 AD. In 41 AD Claudius became emperor and immediately had to deal with a developing revolt among the Jews, both those who were living in Israel and also those living in the city of Alexandria. As was related above, just before his assassination, Caligula had driven the Jews to the brink of revolt by ordering Roman officials to set up his image in the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem. To deal with this explosive situation in 41 AD, Claudius almost certainly turned to his friend Agrippa I for advice and information.

Since Agrippa I is known to have hated Nazarene Christians and since he also knew, as the Book of Acts records, that Christians were causing an uproar in Jerusalem at the very time when he became king of Judea in 41 AD, it seems nearly certain that it was at this same time that Agrippa I wrote his letter of inquiry to Claudius, and Claudius consequently wrote his rescript letter threatening Christians with death for the removal of bodies from tombs. With Agrippa I's intimate knowledge of Christ and Christianity, it was almost certainly he who selected Nazareth as the site for the posting of the Nazareth Inscription.

The question that now needs to be answered is: Does the Nazareth Inscription prove the resurrection of Christ. The answer to that question is no. But what it does prove is that the story of the resurrection of Christ was already well known very early, even to the Emperor Claudius in ca. 41 A.D. This fact clearly proves that the story of the resurrection of Christ was widely known almost immediately after His crucifixion. In other words, the story of the resurrection of Christ must have been a story that was circulated by his Apostles themselves, and it was not a later invention by gentile Christians of the post-apostolic period, as a few modern scholars in the past have argued.

The Nazareth Inscription does force modern scholars into making a choice of either believing in the resurrection of Christ or of believing that His disciples stole His body from His tomb in order to perpetrate a great religious fraud. As is true for philosophy, science, and religion; belief is always the key issue.

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