AN EXPLANATION OF THE TAU CROSS

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Scripture quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version updated edition.

“Tau Cross.” *Wikipedia*. 3 Apr. 2023. 4 Apr. 2023. Web.

The 22nd (and last) letter of the Hebrew alphabet is *taw*. It has somewhat the shape of a vertical rectangle with the bottom side missing: ת. It is pronounced “thow” (like “how” with a voiceless “th” in front); with a dagesh (central dot in the rectangle), it is pronounced “tav.”

The 19th letter of the Greek alphabet is *tau*. It is pronounced “tow” (like “how” with a “t” in front). It has the shape of a cross with the headpiece (the chancel, in a cross-shaped church) missing: τ.

In Ezek 9:4, God instructs an angel to draw a sign on the foreheads of some of the Jews to protect them. Franciscans trace their use the tau cross (shaped like the Greek letter tau: τ) to that sign drawn in Ezekiel’s day.

But Ezekiel prophesied c. 593-c. 571 BCE. But the Jews had little to no contact with Greek civilization until Alexander conquered the Holy Land in 332 BCE. So why would Ezekiel have drawn the Greek letter τ?

What we need is to trace the history of how it came to be believed that Ezekiel drew a Greek letter.

The Hebrew of Ezek 9:4 says, “הִתְוִיתָ תָּו עַל־מִצְחוֹת . . .” This can be literally translated as, “make a mark on the forehead . . .” Hebrew תָּו (the middle word) transliterates as “taw.” Holladay says of the Hebrew word: “name of last letter of Heb. alphabet, orig. in shape of X . . .” Holladay also translates תָּו in Ezek 9:4 as “mark” and says that the word means “(one’s own) mark or signature (confirming a document) . . .” (Holladay, William L. *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*: *Based upon the Lexical Work of Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner*. Leiden: Brill, 2000.)

When Holladay refers to the “original shape,” he means the letter’s shape in paleo-Hebrew script. Here is the Hebrew alphabet in paleo-Hebrew script. You’ll notice that the last letter is in the shape “X.”



By the 400s BCE, Judeans had adopted the Aramaic alphabet, which was used in the Persian Empire. The current Hebrew script (called “square-script”) derived, by the 200s BCE, from the Aramaic script (though some letters did not take on their present shapes until the 1st century CE). The shape of the last letter of the Hebrew alphabet had by then taken on its present shape: ת.

(By the way: the Septuagint of Ezek 9:4 says, “δὸς τὸ σημεῖον ἐπὶ τὰ μέτωπα” (*dos to sēmeion epi to metōma*). This can be literally translated as, “give the sign [*sēmeion*] on the foreheads.” Since “sign” translates Hebrew “mark” without the Hebrew text’s reference to a letter or to a cross shape, the LXX does not seem to have contributed directly to the later tradition associating Ezek 9:4 with the tau cross.)

There seems to be nothing in the Hebrew text of Ezek 9:4 that would prompt anyone to assume that Ezekiel drew a Greek letter. My guess is that the shape of the Hebrew letter in Ezekiel’s day (X) allowed early Christians to associate the mark with Christ’s cross. All that was then necessary was to elide Hebrew “taw” and Greek “tau.” (“Elide”: “join different things together as if they are the same.” *Cambridge Dictionary*.)

Tertullian (d. c. 220 CE) and of Origen (d. c. 253) believed that the drawing of the X in Ezek 9:4 predicted “the Early Christian custom of repeatedly tracing on their own foreheads the sign of the cross.” (“Tau Cross”)

To inaugurate Lateran Council IV (1215), Pope Innocent III gave a sermon on Ezek 9:4. In it he “called all Christians to do penance under the sign of the tau, a sign of conversion and the sign of the cross.” Francis of Assisi, who attended the Council as superior general of the Franciscans, adopted tau “as his personal sign after hearing Pope Innocent III talk about the Tau symbol. It is now used as a symbol of the Secular Franciscan Order.” (“Tau Cross”)