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Jesus or Yeshua: What's in a Name?

by James Pyles

I'm probably stepping out on a limb here and there may be some folks out there who will take offense when they read what I have to say on this matter. Believe me, that's not my intent. It just seems like there's an awful lot of emotion being generated by both the traditional Church and the Messianic community as to which is the "right" name for the Messiah (or the Christ if you will). Let's take a look at some points.

First of all, although there are numerous Messianic prophecies in the Tanakh (Old Testament), none of them mention the Messiah by name...at least in terms of "Jesus" or "Yeshua". However, there is a very specific text in the Apostolic scriptures:

"On the eighth day, when it was time to circumcise him, he was named Jesus, the name the angel had given him before he had been conceived".

Luke 2:21, NIV

"And when eight days had passed, before His circumcision, His name was then called Jesus, the name given by the angel before He was conceived in the womb".

Luke 2:21, Updated NAS

"On the eighth day, when it was time for the brit-milah, he was given the name Yeshua, which is what the angel had called him before his conception".

Luke 2:21, Stern's Complete Jewish Bible

Hmmm. Two out of three translations call him "Jesus". That must be right. Actually, I'm kidding. All three translations are written in English, translating the Greek text. So what is "Jesus" or "Yeshua" in Greek?

The name in that passage from the oldest Greek text we are able to access is "**Iesous**" which is pronounced "**ee-yeh-sooce**". So I guess we're all wrong. We should be saying "Iesous" instead of "Jesus" or "Yeshua" since that's the only record we have of the name the angel (and thus the Almighty) gave him (and after all, I think the Father has a right to name His son)

I'm employing a bit of tongue-in-cheek here but for a good cause. Language is so important and trying to communicate something written in one language to people who read and speak a completely different language isn't always easy. We also have to take into account that the Apostolic scriptures were written in Greek by people for whom Greek was a second language...or does anyone believe that a bunch of native-born Israelis (Jesus included) walked around speaking to each other in Greek all the time?

I bring this up to say that although the original name of Jesus was rendered in Greek in scripture, it probably wasn't the name he was called by his Jewish friends and family. The Apostolic scriptures were written for the benefit of believing Jews and Gentiles who for the most part didn't read or speak Hebrew or Aramaic. The common language in the diaspora and in the then civilized world was Greek. Latin would have been used by the more educated and wealthy in the Roman empire but the Gospels and

Letters were written so they'd be accessible to the majority of the people, not a select few. That doesn't mean that the Israeli born writers wrote and spoke Greek in their day-to-day lives, though.

Think of it this way. During World War II, Nazi Germany occupied France. This fact didn't change the fact that the national language of France remained French. While some French citizens may have had the ability to speak to the occupiers in German, the French people probably still spoke to each other in French. Certainly, a French family gathering around the dinner table would ask if someone could pass the salt in French. Why should this have been any different in Roman occupied Israel?

It wouldn't have been different. While some Jews would have had the ability to communicate in Greek and possibly Latin (Paul is recorded as having written the last few sentences of some of his Greek-language letters himself in Greek rather than using a translator...see *Colossians 4:18* for an example of this), the vast majority of these Greek letters were dictated to scribes who were bilingual and could write a more polished letter in the Greek language (although Paul was very well educated, Peter was a common fisherman...a blue collar worker, so to speak. Would he have known Greek as fluently as his native tongue? Of course, he used a scribe).

Now, referring back to the passage in *Luke 2*, just what was the name given that we read as "Iesous" in Greek and as "Jesus" in English translations from the Greek. We don't know for certain. We know it wasn't literally "Jesus"...certainly if his mother and (adopted...step) father Joseph most commonly spoke Hebrew or Aramaic.

As an aside, the jury is still out as to whether Hebrew was the common language of the Israeli people in the early First Century or whether it was used only for ceremonial purposes. In the latter case, the common spoken language would have been Aramaic, which is a close cousin to Hebrew (both being Semitic languages).

If you didn't have special linguistic skills and you heard both Hebrew and Aramaic spoken to you, chances are you wouldn't be able to tell the difference. Also, on the day of the ritual circumcision of Jesus as required by the Torah, the service in the Temple would certainly have been performed in Hebrew which means that the name given would have been spoken in "the holy tongue". In either case, his name couldn't have been pronounced "Gee-sus" because there is no hard "J" sound in Hebrew or Aramaic.

Think of it this way. The name "Jose" in Spanish isn't pronounced "Jo-see", it's pronounced "Ho-say" (accent on the second syllable). The "J" sounds like an "H". That's the correct pronunciation in Spanish since it's a Spanish name. Hebrew words that start with a "J" when they are translated into English (such as the name "Jacob") aren't said the same way in Hebrew. The original Hebrew name (and you **can** find this in the Hebrew texts of the Old Testament) of the patriarch Jacob (as in the one married to Leah and Rachel) is "Ya'akov" pronounced "Yah-ah-kov". You can find Jewish men in Israel right now who pronounce their name exactly like that, even though we'd translate that name into English as "Jacob" ("Y" sound to "J" sound). The fact that we say this name one way in English doesn't invalidate how it's pronounced in Hebrew.

Getting back to "Yeshua" or "not-Yeshua", it wasn't exactly an uncommon name in First Century Israel and the name appears in Biblical books written in the time after the Babylonian exile such as Ezra and Daniel as well as occurring in the Dead Sea Scrolls. "Yeshua" is likely a form of the name "Yehoshua" (Joshua) which is a compound word comprised of "Yeho" which is a theophoric element representing the most sacred name of the Almighty. This is the tetragrammaton "yod-hey-vav-hey" which is often represented as Y-H-V-H. The second part "shua" is a noun which means "a cry for help" or "a saving

cry". Another way to look at the name "Yehoshua" is as coming from the Hebrew root word yod-shin-ayin, meaning "to save". In either case, these meanings point significantly to the purpose and mission of our Messiah.

The literal meaning of the name "Yeshua" does **not** mean "Salvation". In Hebrew, the word "yshua" means "salvation" and the word "yoshia" means "he will save", so the issue of his name and what it means isn't really quite as clear cut as many of its proponents claim. However, while the jury is still out among various Biblical scholars and faith groups, the original name given to our Lord in **Luke 2:21** wasn't either "Jesus" or "Iesous" but a Hebrew/Aramaic name fairly close to "Yeshua" or "Yehoshua".

Since his original Semitic language name isn't known for certain, does it really matter if we call him "Yeshua" or "Jesus"? It depends on who you ask. For many in the Messianic community, the pronunciation "Yeshua" is the only correct pronunciation and the only one that's theologically and historically acceptable. Some feel the use of "Jesus" is at least anti-Semitic and a denial of the Jewishness of Jesus and our being grafted in to the Hebraic root as Paul describes in **Romans 11**. From a traditional Christian point of view, a Messianic worshiper's refusal to use the name "Jesus" is to deny him, his grace, and all that he has done for us. Generations of Christians have learned to love their Savior by the name "Jesus" and that connection and emotion is so strong that to suggest any other name seems a blatant insult.

It is by the name Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed. He is the stone you builders rejected, which has become the capstone. Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved".

Acts 4:10-12 (NIV)

The part of the above quote not in italics are actually parts of verses from **Psalms 118**. I used the NIV translation to crystallize the point that when an English speaking Christian reads that verse, they probably aren't thinking about translation issues. They probably are thinking that "*no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved*" is "*the name Jesus Christ of Nazareth*". However, does that mean the exact spelling "Jesus Christ of Nazareth" is the "*only*" name by which we must be saved? I'm sure in a Spanish speaking church, if they pronounced "Jesus" as "Hay-soos", no one would have an issue. It's the same name translated into the Spanish language. It's the same Savior. Only an insensitive cad would say that these Spanish speaking worshipers were disrespecting the Savior by speaking his name in Spanish instead of English (and how ironic that the Savior's name in English has become more "sacred" than how it's pronounced in any other language including Hebrew).

So where does that leave us? First off, I think we can safely say that the name of the Savior in English isn't the only name by which we can be saved. It wasn't recorded that way in the original Greek text of the Bible. If we believe that there was a single way to pronounce the Savior's name based on the Biblical record, then we'd better get used to calling him "Iesous" and not accepting the translation of his only Biblically recorded name into any other language including English.

But would that be fair to generations of believers who have lived and died loving him and his name as they understood it; "Jesus"? Probably not. At least I'm not going to make an issue out of it. Our congregation uses "Jesus" and "Yeshua" more or less interchangeably. I suppose if we had members who primarily spoke Spanish, we would add the "Hay-soos" pronunciation to the list.

That we use the name "Yeshua" instead of "Jesus" on occasion doesn't mean we hate the name "Jesus" or that we feel superior by using "Yeshua". And yet, the church has lost so much meaning by

completely disregarding the context in which Jesus lived and the context in which the Bible was written. There's nothing wrong with trying to reconnect to the thoughts and intent of the people who were living witnesses to the earthly life of the Messiah by using language. It's the person of the Savior that we all are seeking and trying to draw near to. Many languages may have many names for him, but he is one.

Many people have been healed and saved in the name of Jesus but to believe that Jesus is the exclusive name of the Messiah isn't rational. When he was a lad of eight out playing (I have to guess this is true because there's no Biblical record of it) with the other boys and it was time for dinner, I doubt that Mary (Miryam, but that's another story) called out, "Jesus! Time to come in for dinner". Since she was likely speaking Hebrew or Aramaic, I doubt she yelled out "Iesous", either. Probably it was a name that started with a "Y" sound...something like "Yehoshua" or "Yeshua" but we can't be really sure.

We can be sure that the name his mother called out to him when it was time for dinner was probably the same name that John the Baptist called him during the immersion when the Spirit descended upon the L-rd. It was probably the same name that Peter, and Matthew, and John, and many others used when they spoke to him. It was the name the disciples thought of in grief when he died and the name they shouted out in joy when he was resurrected.

What's in a name? Is it important? Probably so. Most people don't like it if you don't remember their name or don't pronounce it correctly. The use of "Yeshua" is an attempt to pay respect to him by trying to pronounce his name correctly. That doesn't mean that people who call him "Gee-sus" or "Hay-soos" have any less respect or love for the Savior. However, it doesn't mean the "Yeshua people" are any less respectful or loving, either. What's really important is who we have in our minds and in our hearts. Who do we yearn to see return and to reign over all the Earth? Who do we thank daily for our salvation and the chance to call ourselves sons and daughters of the Almighty? If you know him and he knows you...you're probably in good hands. Let's not fight over pronunciations and controversies. Let's join hands together and give thanks that we all have been given a free gift by his grace.

Sources

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