

The name of, 'Jesus'

Introduction

The issue

The world that we are living in today keeps throwing up new heresies and aberrations that never occurred in church history before; this is how deep the apostasy in the church is as we race to the end.

One modern issue is that Messianic Christians tell us that for nearly 2,000 years English speaking people have been using the wrong name for the Second Person of the Trinity. English people call God's Saviour, 'Jesus' but this is wrong according to these people. Most of them insist that Jesus should be called 'Yeshua' or 'Yashua'; however, a smaller number demand that Jesus be called the longer form 'Yehoshua' or 'Yahushua'.

Now if they are correct then English speaking people have been dishonouring God's Messiah for a long time. Every time you sing, pray and worship you are blaspheming the Lord – if they are right.

It is time we looked at this in a detailed manner and sought the truth.

Background

The name of Jesus is slightly altered in languages around the world. When the Bible was translated into other languages changes had to be made since some alphabets did not have signs for certain sound, or their letters did not correlate with the Greek alphabet. So, by virtue of the limits of alphabets, there are slight differences and this is entirely normal. We should remember that these languages were initiated by God at Babel and he is fully aware of the difficulties. If he wanted unity of Scriptural expression he would not have confused men's tongues in the first place.

God's sovereign providence

This is a really important factor to bear in mind in any discussion of this type. God's sovereign control of the Scriptures did not end when they were written down in their original languages but he supervised the collation and preservation of them to this very day. Without God's supervision the Scriptures would have vanished long ago like most other ancient documents. Because he was in sovereign control, we have more extant manuscripts of the OT and NT than any other ancient text.

If God had wanted British people (who officially received the Gospel as a nation before any other nation) to call his Son Yeshua, then God would have sovereignly controlled the translation process to ensure this. He did not.

Is it not extremely foolish to believe that God was unhappy with English pronunciation of his Son's name in Britain for 2,000 years and did nothing about it? To suggest that 'Jesus' is wrong is to accuse God of failing on his watch. Messianic Christians should be careful about blaspheming God when they make their assertions.

So, with this in mind, let's look at the facts involved.

The beginning: the Greek New Testament

Greek: A universal vernacular language

As in all matters, we must start with the truth and not some favoured hypothesis. The NT books were not written down originally in Hebrew or Aramaic, they were written in Koine ('common') Greek; the language of the ordinary Mediterranean person.

This was by the providence of God and a result of the conquests of Alexander the Great. Through the Greek Empire a common language (Greek) developed for ease of trade, governance and general communications. Hellenism (classical Greek culture)¹ dominated the empire and Jews were no different. In fact, Jews in Palestine became rabid in their pursuit of Hellenic culture, which dominated their social activities, housing style, writings and so on. To get on in life you had to adopt Hellenic culture, and Jews know how to pursue money.

All international trading was done in Greek and a Greek education was highly favoured. Even the Romans were dominated by Hellenism, as their adoption of the Greek pantheon shows.² The apostle Paul was a very highly talented individual since he had both a Greek education and Hebrew rabbinic training. No other apostle could bridge the gap between the Gentile and Jewish worlds better than Paul. Thus Paul could quote both the Tenakh³ and Greek poets with ease.

God's sovereignty oversaw the growth of the Greek Empire (which his word predicted) in order to prepare for the spread of the Gospel. Thus Alexander gave the then known world (Eurasia) a common language for administration; a system of roads; local governance to hinder banditry; well-organised ports, peace, and so on.

That the Jews got on board with this fully is demonstrated in the plain fact that in the time of the early church and Gospels the version of the Hebrew Bible in common use was the Greek Septuagint translation of the OT.⁴ This had been written in Alexandria a couple of hundred years before the birth of Jesus and was, by his time, the universal Jewish text for ordinary people; this is why the apostles quote from it so frequently in the NT. Rabbis and synagogues would have used Hebrew Scriptures (if they could afford the multiple scrolls) but ordinary folk used the Septuagint.

So, under God's providence the original NT was written in Koine Greek.

Jesus

This is pronounced 'ee-ay-sooce' and it is the Greek way of saying 'Jesus' in the Greek NT. It is the Greek transliteration of the Hebrew 'Joshua' (see later), meaning 'God saves' or 'Yahweh is salvation'.

¹ Hellene was the term for an ancient Greek, which continued to the modern day; the title of the now exiled Greek monarch was, '*the King of the Hellenes*'. Thus the style of classical Greek culture was called, 'Hellenic'.

² The chief Roman gods were the Greek gods and demi-gods but given Latin names. Thus Heracles became Hercules; Artemis became Diana; Aphrodite became Venus; Hermes became Mercury etc.

³ The Hebrew Bible [the Old Testament] comprising the Law (Torah), the Prophets, and the Hagiographa or Writings.

⁴ This was the first translation of the OT into Greek, around 280-250 BC. Many Jews lived in Mediterranean Greek provinces (later Roman) and spoke Greek; also many Jews in Palestine spoke and wrote Greek who needed a new version. Some say that this translation was requested by Ptolemy Lagi for the Alexandrian library, others that it was Ptolemy Philadelphus. This version was called *The Septuagint* since it was supposedly translated by 70 or 72 elders (hence the abbreviation LXX - '70' in Latin).

So the form of name that God inspired to be preserved in the Scriptures was neither 'Jesus' nor 'Yeshua'; it was 'Iesous'. This is the inspired name for God's Son as written down in the original transcription of his word.

The name for the Saviour that was spread throughout the then known world in Greek was Iesous.

Iesous is also the word chosen by the Septuagint translators as a Greek equivalent for Joshua (Yehoshua / Yeshua).

This is unequivocal and an end of the matter. God did not use a Hebrew or Aramaic form but chose a Greek one.

Furthermore, we see from other works (such as Josephus or Philo) that Iesous is the standard Greek word used to transliterate Yehoshua and Yeshua.

Technical: Hebrew to Greek

Regarding transliterating from the Hebrew 'Jehoshua' to the Greek 'Iesous':

- 'J' (rather 'Y'): becomes an iota (I).
- 'E': is a similar sound in Hebrew and Greek. [The Hebrew sound for the vowel Heh is like 'eh', 'ah' or 'oh'. The Greek letter Eta has an 'ey' sound as in 'they'.]
- 'H': Greek has no stand-alone letter for 'H' (it uses an aspirant), so this was dropped. Without an 'H' the 'O' also disappeared.
- 'SH': the Hebrew shin sound becomes a sigma (s) in Greek, which does not have an 'sh' sounding letter.
- 'U': is equivalent in both Hebrew and Greek.
- 'A': Greek doesn't end a name with a vowel so Greek grammar often demands that a final sigma (s) appears. [Note the Hebrew 'Moshe' becomes the Greek 'Moses'.]

This was the standard way of harmonising the languages in classical times, both by secular and religious academics. The name Iesous was also accepted by Jesus and the apostles without question.

The Latin translation of the NT

As the Roman imperial system began to dominate the Roman Empire territories, Greek began to diminish in importance and Latin eventually became the universal language of Europe. However, at the beginning it was the lingua franca of academics and continued to be so until about 100 years ago.

As godly men recognised a need for a new translation of the Bible for Latin speakers, and especially Latin readers, a new version was commissioned. This was completed by the Church Father, Jerome, in 405 and the finished product was called, 'The Vulgate'.

The Latin word *vulgata* means an 'edition prepared for the public', [feminine past participle of *vulgare*, from *vulgus* 'common people']. The word 'vulgate' therefore effectively means formal common or colloquial speech. It was adopted as the official text for the Roman Catholic Church.

This became the only readily available Bible for English speakers until the Reformation (apart from a few local translations).⁵ That means that the Vulgate was the formal Bible for a thousand years in Britain. All the great men of God that produced godly theology in this period, all those blessed by God in reading the Bible, were under the sovereign providence of God who had preserved his word for Britain in Latin.

Jesus

Jerome had to convert the Greek word 'Iesous' into Latin for his Bible version, thus the Latin would have spelled 'Iesus'. Note that the original 1611 KJV uses 'Iesus'.

However, the English language developed in the 17th century and any name beginning with I or Y was started with a J – hence 'Jesus'.

This is how the English language arrived at the name 'Jesus'.

The first English Bible translators had 'Joshua' for 'Jehoshua' or 'Yeshua' because they worked from the Hebrew. However, after a thousand years of Latin Bibles they translated Jesus' name from the Latin, which was close to the Greek, and which people had become accustomed to. Since God had chosen Iesous for the name of his Son in the NT, the job of translators was to faithfully reproduce that – hence 'Iesus'. English semantic convention then necessitated the change to 'Jesus'.

Hebrew words for Jesus

Most people know that Jesus' Hebrew name would have been 'Joshua' (the English transliteration of Jehoshua or Yehoshua).⁶

The character Joshua in the Pentateuch was originally called 'Hoshea' (Num 13:8, 16) but his name was changed by Moses to 'Jehoshua' (Num 13:16; 1 Chron 7:27). After the Babylonian exile this name was more commonly morphed into the short form 'Jeshua' (= Yeshua) as a result of Aramaic influences. He is called 'Jeshua' in Neh 8:17 in the KJV and Jehoshua in 1 Chron 7:27 in the KJV ('Joshua' NKJV).

Yeshua (or Yeshuwah) is transliterated into English as Jeshua in 1 and 2 Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah; all written under an Aramaic influence. [Ancient tradition averred that Chronicles was written by Ezra; but this cannot be proved; however, it is conceded that the books were written in the Ezra-Nehemiah period.]

'Yeshua' is really an Aramaic form of Yehoshua. For example in Ezra 3:2 we note 'Jeshua (Yeshua) the son of Jozadak'. This man is the same priest mentioned in Zech 6:11 where he is called, 'Joshua (Yehoshua) the son of Jehozadak'. The former reflects the Aramaic influence.

A strong technical case can be made that the best original form is Yehoshua or Yahushua. This is formed from the Hebrew letters:

⁵ The Saxons had some portions of the Bible (trans. by Bede and Aldhelm) and into Old English (by Alfred and Aelfric) but there would have been very few copies. Around 1330 Richard Rolle and William of Shoreham translated the Psalms into Middle English. The complete Bible was translated into Chaucerian Middle English from the Latin Vulgate by John Wycliffe; aided by Nicholas of Hereford and revised by John Purvey in 1388. In all cases there would have been few expensive, hand-written copies available to the general people; even if they could read.

⁶ The Hebrew letter we translate as 'J' should be translated as a 'Y'. There is no 'J' sound in the Hebrew language.

- Yod = ‘Y’ or ‘I’ sound.
- Heh = a vowel sounding like ‘ah’ or ‘oh’.
- Waw or vav = the vowel ‘oo’ or a ‘w’ sound.
- Shin = ‘sh’.
- Vowel point to give ‘oo’ sound. Some texts (e.g. Deut 3:21 and Jud 2:7) give another waw which is why lexicons give two spellings.
- Ayin = silent without a vowel point but indicates ‘ah’ sound.

Forms of the name in English Bibles and lexicons (they vary in attempts to capture the sound):

- Joshua. This appears 216 times in the KJV.
- Yeshua. This does not appear in the KJV.
- Jeshua. This appears 30 times in the KJV.
- Yeshuwah. This does not appear in the KJV.
- Jehoshua. This appears twice in the KJV (Num 13:16; 1 Chron 7:27).
- Yehoshua. This does not appear in the KJV.
- Y@howshuwa’. This does not appear in the KJV.
- Y@howshu’a. This does not appear in the KJV.

The word ‘Yashua’, popular with some Messianic Christians, has no origin in Scripture but arises from a misunderstanding. It is a mispronunciation of the Aramaic word ‘Yeshua’. Yashua or Yahshua omits the third letter (waw or ‘oo’ sound) of Yahushua.

Archaeology shows that the name Yeshua was common in the Second Temple period. Thus both Yeshua and Yehoshua were in use in the Gospel times amongst Hebrew speakers. However, on balance it appears that the true Hebrew derivation of Jesus’ name is not ‘Yeshua’ at all but ‘Yahushua.’ Messianic Christians are barking up the wrong tree.

Both the names ‘Yeshua’ and ‘Yehoshua’ are transliterated into the Greek ‘Iesous’ for the Septuagint translation. ‘Joshua’ in Acts 7:45 and Heb 4:8 is also transliterated as ‘Iesous’ in the Greek NT. The word ‘Jesus’ in the Greek NT is Iesous.

So, the word of God in the original inspired text translates: Jesus’ name and the OT character Joshua (Jehoshua) by ‘Iesous’. The text for Jesus’ name that God ordained to be used for the spread of the Gospel in all lands is ‘Iesous’.

This is unequivocal. God himself chose ‘Iesous’ to be the name used.

Aramaic word for Jesus

Jesus spoke Aramaic

It is widely accepted that the Jews in Palestine of Jesus’ day did not ordinarily speak Hebrew but spoke Aramaic. After the Babylonian exile and the return, the Jews slowly began to speak the then lingua franca, Aramaic. Jesus and his disciples spoke a Galilean dialect of Aramaic. How much Aramaic was spoken throughout Palestine is debated.

Aramaic is a branch of the Semitic family of languages (chiefly Akkadian), but especially the language of Syria used as a lingua franca in the Near East from the 6th century BC. It

replaced Hebrew locally as the language of the Jews, until displaced by Arabic in the 7th century AD.

The word Aramaic is from the Greek *'Aramaios'* meaning 'of Aram' (the Biblical name of Syria). Aramaic was the diplomatic language used by the Assyrian Empire, which continued into the Babylonian and Persian Empires.

Aramaic words in the Bible

The Bible has a number of verses written down in Aramaic⁷ (which used to be called 'Chaldee') such that the standard Hebrew-English Lexicon (Brown Driver Briggs Gesenius) has an Aramaic section at the end.

Proof that Aramaic was the spoken language of ordinary Palestinian Jews is evidenced in the NT. It is the case in the NT where words claimed to be 'the Hebrew tongue' are actually Aramaic. Some examples:

- 'Talitha, cumi' (Mk 5:41); meaning 'Damsel arise'. Peter heard and remembered the Aramaic words, spoken by Jesus to the child; Mark interprets the simple words into Greek for those who did not know Aramaic.
- 'Hosanna' (Matt 21:9, 15; Mk 11:9-10; Jn 12:13); meaning 'save, I pray'.
- 'Bethesda' (Jn 5:2); meaning 'house of mercy'.
- 'Gabbatha' (Jn 9:13); meaning 'pavement'.
- 'Golgotha' (Jn 19:17); meaning 'place of a skull'.
- 'Rabboni' (Jn 20:16); meaning 'teacher'.

Where Hebrew terms instead of Greek are used in the NT, they are nearly always Aramaic and rarely Hebrew (exceptions are 'Abaddon' in Rev 9:11; and 'Armageddon' Rev 16:16 – however this word is a cryptic and symbolic name whose Hebrew origins are debated. The Hebrew 'Har-Megedon' would mean a mountain; but Megiddo is situated in a valley.).

The phrase, 'in Hebrew' is used in these places where the actual words used are Aramaic: Jn 19:13, 17, 20; 20:16; Acts 21:40, 22:2, 26:14. While Messianic Christian teachers argue that 'in Hebrew' means Hebrew words, the fact is that what is meant is 'the language of the Hebrews', which at that time was Aramaic.

We can thus summarise that while Hebrew could be used in Palestine, it was mostly used by the religious leaders and in the synagogue; but on a day-to-day basis, and certainly where other nationalities were present, the ordinary people spoke Aramaic. If people wanted to do business or deal with local government, they had to speak Aramaic. However, Palestine was multilingual, having Greek, Latin, Hebrew and Aramaic speakers.

Thus the main lingua franca for the Mediterranean area (chiefly in writing), especially where there was a Hellenic influence, was initially Greek until later replaced by Latin. This was the original common, written vernacular throughout the empire. However, the local vernacular in Palestine and nearby regions (Syria, Babylonia) was Aramaic.

Aramaic / Hebrew Gospels?

Suppositions that the Gospels were originally written down in Aramaic are untenable. The idea that they were originally written in Hebrew is facile. No serious scholar believes this and there is not a shred of evidence for it. The earliest Aramaic translations of the NT were from the Greek. There is a possibility that Matthew copied his Gospel into Hebrew later.

⁷ E.g. in Daniel 2:4-7:28; Ezra 4:8-6:18, 7:12-26; Jer 10:11.

Even the book of Hebrews was written in Greek because that was the vernacular used by Jews in the Diaspora.

Two versions of Aramaic

Around the time of the Gospels onwards Aramaic divided into two versions, which are generally called East and West Syriac. West Aramaic, or Syriac, included Nabatean, Palmyrene and Jewish Palestinian. East Aramaic included Syriac, Babylonian Aramaic and Mandaean.

The Aramaic for 'Jesus'

The West Syriac dialect pronounced the name of Jesus as Yeshu. However, the normal Aramaic (Classical Syriac) pronunciation was Isho or Eesho. This is used in the Peshitta (Syriac) NT⁸. It also uses Isho for Joshua. Churches following the East Syrian Rite still use the name Isho.

The consonantal spelling of Jesus' name in Aramaic was YSW. When vowels were added later after 500AD the Eastern Syriac version emerged as Isho; the Western Syriac pronunciation developed as Yeshu. However, it seems that the Classical Aramaic of Jesus' time would have used the Isho pronunciation.

It is noteworthy that the Quran uses the term Issa for Jesus. This development is understandable when you realise that Mohammed would have had contact with the Eastern Syrian church, which used Isho.

While we cannot postulate with certainty, it may have been that Jesus was addressed (if anyone used his name at all) as Isho.

Conclusion

Out of respect for Jesus' authority he was rarely called by his name at all. His friends and disciples called him master, lord, rabbi, rabboni, and other titles of reverence.⁹ If anyone called Jesus 'Yeshua' while he was on earth we will never know. It may be that different dialect speakers called him different things.

What his mother actually called him is unknown to us; therefore it is pointless to speculate. Growing up in Galilee, where there were strong Greek and Aramaic influences as well as Hebrew in the synagogue, it is hard to suggest what Jesus was called from day-to-day; though it is likely that his parents used the Hebrew 'Yehoshua' at his naming as it was traditional to give a child a Hebrew first name. However, in his very early years Jesus may even have had an Egyptian name because that was where he lived.¹⁰

What can we be certain of?

⁸ Peshitta (lit. 'plain', 'simple') the ancient Syriac version of the Bible, used in Syriac-speaking Christian countries from the early 5th century and still the official Bible of the Syrian Christian Churches. The OT was in use by the 3rd century and the NT by the 5th. It is uncertain whether Jews or Christians translated the OT portion.

⁹ E.g. Lk 5:5; Matt 8:21, 26:25; Jn 20:16

¹⁰ Herod died in the 37th year of his reign. It is not known when he began his reign, thus it is impossible to determine the time that Joseph remained in Egypt. The best chronologers suggested that he died somewhere between two and four years after the birth of Christ, but when cannot now be confirmed. Nor can it be determined at what age Jesus was taken into Egypt, but probably less than a year. However, some commentators say that Jesus was only in Egypt for a matter of months.

1. The inspired NT called him 'Iesous'. Both Jewish and Gentile Christians using the NT would have called him 'Iesous'. The NT never calls him 'Yeshua'. Even the OT person Joshua is not called 'Yeshua' in the Greek NT but 'Iesous'.
2. For a thousand years the dominance of the Vulgate meant that Jesus was called 'Iesus'.
3. For 600 years English Christians have used 'Jesus' as the nearest thing (in grammatical parlance) to the Greek form.
4. God preserved the Latin form 'Iesus' for 1,000 years and then the form 'Jesus' for 600 years and counting. At no time has God changed those terms into 'Yeshua'. This only appeared recently in a period of massive heresy and apostasy where men have itchy ears for doctrines of demons.

You cannot demand that we now call Jesus 'Yeshua' without contradicting the word of God. If the inspired NT called him 'Iesous' then we have no grounds for calling him 'Yeshua'. Furthermore, 'Yeshua' is not the proper Hebrew name for the Lord; his name in Hebrew would have been 'Yehoshua' or 'Yahushua'. Why people rabidly focused upon Hebrew would choose an Aramaic name is confusing. As for those who insist upon 'Yashua', well that is just a mistake.

If you are English speaking and call the Lord 'Yeshua', think – why did you start doing that? Was it as a result of the demands of some teacher who gave you no evidence for this change? Why would you do something as serious as this, that contradicts God's own word in the original Greek text of the NT?

Do not listen to men with agendas; listen to God.

You shall call His name JESUS, [Iesous] for He will save His people from their sins. Matt 1:21

The nearest sound we have to Iesous in English is Jesus.

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