

Practical Hermeneutics: JAP382

## IS JESUS' NAME USED IN VAIN?

by James Patrick Holding

This article first appeared in the Practical Hermeneutics column of the CHRISTIAN RESEARCH JOURNAL, volume 38, number 02 (2015). For further information or to subscribe to the CHRISTIAN RESEARCH JOURNAL, go to: <http://www.equip.org/christian-research-journal/>.

---

As Christians, we frequently pray “in the name of Jesus.” In the biblical world, a name represented a person’s authority and was a symbol of all that a person stood for. A peculiar movement afield today, fostered by groups such as the Hebrew Israelites and the “Sacred Name Movement,” declares that Christians are making a fundamental error when they pray in the name of Jesus. It is said that by using the Anglicanized translation *Jesus*, rather than the original Hebrew *Yehoshua* (or *Yeshua*), we are dishonoring the name of our Savior. Similar objections are raised against the variation *Iesous*, which appears in New Testament Greek.

**From Here to There.** To begin, we need to explore how we got from the Hebrew name *Yehoshua* to the English name *Jesus*. Despite the difference in English, *Jesus* is the same name as *Joshua*, which is the proper name of the Old Testament figure who led Israel after the death of Moses. The meaning of Joshua/Jesus in Hebrew, *Yehoshua*, is “Yahweh is salvation.” (Another variation, *Yeshua*, is a later contraction of *Yehoshua*.) This reflects the construction of Jewish names as divine patronymics, or names based on the name of God (Yahweh) as a divine father figure. So, for example, *Jehoshaphat* (the name of a Jewish king in the Old Testament) means, “Yahweh has judged.”

From the Hebrew *Yehoshua*, the next step is to the Greek variation, *Iesous*. Greek rendered the Hebrew Y as an I, and formed masculine names with an –s at the end. *Iesous* was the standard way that the name *Yehoshua* was rendered in the Greek translation of the Old Testament. The next step was the Latin rendering *Iesus*. The final

important shift occurred with the use of the letter J as a variant of the letter I. This was a later development in Latin, and brings us to the form now also used in English, *Jesus*.

**Who Says So?** It is the contention of those whom we will hereafter designate *Yeshua-onlyists* that, unless we are using one of the original Hebrew renderings of the name of our Savior, we are in some way compromising God's honor. The drive to replace *Jesus* with *Yeshua* in our expressions is not limited to any single group, nor is it always presented as a legalistic requirement. Nor should it be confused with efforts by mainstream Christian missionary groups such as Jews for Jesus. They use *Yeshua* rather than *Jesus* as a form of outreach to Jewish non-Christians, or as part of their educational programs for Christians to help them explore the Jewish background of their faith. Jews for Jesus does not insist on the use of *Yeshua* as though it were a point of doctrine or fidelity to Scripture. In contrast, members of what is sometimes called the Hebrew Roots movement may be quite insistent that we abandon the use of *Jesus* and revert to the Hebrew *Yehoshua* or one of its variants, such as *Yeshua*.

One such advocate, Dan Baxley, describes the use of the form *Jesus* as "a lie and a deception" and refers to a "deliberate conspiracy by the preachers, teachers and scholars of the bible [sic] to deceive those honestly coming to the God of the Bible for answers and seeking salvation."<sup>1</sup> Baxley further declares: "The Biblical scholars have withheld the true identity of our Salvation by their traditions and given the world a false name, a false identity directing those called, those coming toward the Kingdom away from their salvation."<sup>2</sup>

Lew White, the author of the conspiracy-theory book *Fossilized Customs*, is specific enough to advise his adherents that "Y'shua" or even "Yahshua" are acceptable renderings, and that "Yeshua might be alright, as long as it isn't attempting to modify the vowel for the sound of the name, YAH."<sup>3</sup> Apart from individuals such as Baxley and White, there are also a handful of groups that insist on the exclusivity of the *Yeshua* variation. The Hebrew-Israelites, an African-American centered movement that teaches a bowdlerized form of Judaism, have a decided preference for the *Yeshua* variation. The so-called "Sacred Name Movement" strongly emphasizes the Jewish roots of Christianity, such that members may also practice certain aspects of Judaism such as following the Pentateuch's dietary laws. One publisher has even produced a "Proper Name Version of the King James Bible" in which *Jesus* is dutifully replaced throughout the New Testament with *Yahshua*.

What, according to these theorists, will be the penalty for failing to use the proper form of the Savior's name? Baxley is content to say that, at final judgment, all who used the *Jesus* variation will be compelled to bow to the Savior knowing His true

name, and the deception associated with *Jesus* will be revealed. Other Yeshua-onlyists lay out no specific penalty for misuse of the Savior's name, but assume it to be a symptom of a larger theological apostasy deserving its own punishment.<sup>4</sup>

**What's in a Name?** What lies behind this peculiar focus on using the precise original form of the name *Jesus* in Hebrew? Some, in the manner of Jews for Jesus, merely make the change to honor Christianity's Jewish roots. Others, however, offer a wide variety of theological rationales.

One rationale is that the modern English name *Jesus* and its pronunciation bears an uncomfortable resemblance to the English phrase, "Hey, Zeus!" Or, it may be said, *Jesus* actually means in Greek, "Hail, Zeus!" According to some Yeshua-only believers, the variation *Jesus* is a disguised way of summoning or honoring the leading deity of ancient Greece. This claim may be supported by pointing to other translations, such as the name *Tarsus* (the home city of the apostle Paul) allegedly meaning "sweat of Zeus."

Another rationale is focused on passages such as Revelation 11:18: "And the nations were angry, and thy wrath is come, and the time of the dead, that they should be judged, and that thou shouldest give reward unto thy servants the prophets, and to the saints, and them that fear thy *name*" (KJV). According to some Yeshua-onlyists, using a variation such as *Jesus* shows a marked lack of "fear" of the Savior's name, and is a sign of unbelief. Also referenced are passages such as Acts 4:12, which says that "God has given no other *name* under heaven by which we must be saved" (KJV). Since God has given this name, it is reasoned, we have no business making any changes to it, even for the purposes of translation.

Yet another claim is that by using the Anglicanized form *Jesus*, we are in some way compromising the entire gospel message! As noted, the English meaning of the Hebrew name *Yehoshua* is, "God (Yahweh) is salvation." According to some Yeshua-onlyists, by not using *Yehoshua*, we are obscuring the message that it is Yahweh alone that provides salvation.

**Why Are They Wrong?** It can be extremely difficult to take pedantic arguments such as those presented by Yeshua-onlyists seriously. However, given the widespread and growing nature of this movement, we should take a few moments to address their claims.

The claim that behind *Jesus* there lies the hidden meaning, "Hail, Zeus!" displays a fundamental lack of knowledge of biblical Greek. The superficial similarity in the way both names end, with -s, reflects, as noted, the construction of masculine nouns in

Greek. Male Greek names such as Linus and Eubulus (2 Tim. 4:21) nearly always ended with an S. There is therefore no unique tie between an –s ending and the Greek deity Zeus. The allegation that (e.g.) Tarsus means “sweat of Zeus” is also incorrect. *Tarsus* means *flat basket*, derived from the city’s location in a fertile valley in the mountains.

Yeshua-onlyists also fail to account for non-English renderings of the Savior’s name, such as *Yesus* (Indonesia), *Iesu* (Japan), or *Ihu* (Maori). Obviously, none of these could in any way be construed as hidden messages to “Hail Zeus,” since they either do not share a similar pronunciation, and/or come from cultures where Zeus was unknown. They also fail to account for Zeus being widely recognized by his own Roman variation, *Jupiter*.

Another difficulty is found in the claim that translations in some way hide the meaning behind *Yehoshua*, that is, “Yahweh is salvation.” A native speaker of any language (apart from Hebrew) is not going to be able simply to look at *Yehoshua* and know that it means, “Yahweh is salvation”! To find this out, he or she will need to consult some sort of lexical aid. The reader can perform the same kind of consultation for the English variation *Jesus*, which will immediately inform him or her that *Jesus* in its original language means “Yahweh is salvation.”

Finally, we may note that even when using *Yehoshua* or *Yeshua*, the Yeshua-onlyist is already utilizing what amounts to a compromised version of the name they so revere! *Yehoshua* and *Yeshua* are actually Anglicanized variations transliterated from Hebrew characters. Why could not someone object that by not using Hebrew characters, we could send a mistaken message? For example, it might be argued that *Yehoshua* is a way of saying “Yay, you!” to Shu, the Egyptian god of the air. This may seem ridiculous, but it is no less ridiculous than supposing that the variation *Jesus* will lead people to honor Zeus.

In summary, the “Yeshua-only” movement requires the believer to perform a series of semantic gyrations that completely ignore the role and history of translation in the expression of human language. The issue is one of a legalistic application of nomenclature, which draws our attention away from far more serious doctrinal issues in order to engage a meaningless triviality.

**James Patrick Holding** is president of Tekton Apologetics Ministries and the author of *Scripture and Slavery* (Amazon Kindle).

---

## NOTES

- 1 Dan Baxley, "JESUS Is Not His Name," [www.yahshuaservant.com/jesus-not-his-name.htm](http://www.yahshuaservant.com/jesus-not-his-name.htm). Accessed November 10, 2014.
- 2 Baxley, "YaHshua is Messiah," <http://www.yashuaservant.com>. Accessed November 10, 2014.
- 3 Lew White, "Author's Response to Two Critics of Fossilized Customs," <http://www.fossilizedcustoms.com/critic.html>. Accessed November 10, 2014.
- 4 For example, The House of Yahweh (<http://www.yahweh.com/The-Name-Of-Yahshua.html>) creates out of whole cloth a revised history of the Roman Emperor Constantine, whose goal is said to have been "to create an entirely new god for his empire who would unite all religious factions under one deity." They conclude that Constantine rolled together the Druidic deity Hesus and the Hindu god Krishna to make, "Jesus Christ"!