

Is the Name “Jesus” Pagan?

by C.M. Hegg

In our modern times there is a growing movement of believers coming out of the Church and into a new understanding of biblical truth. The rise of Christians turning to the Torah as a means for the believer’s sanctification seems to be growing rapidly. Those coming out of the Church are usually struck at some point with the realization that they should be keeping the Sabbath, or that the Torah as a whole is something God wants them to be doing. Those who awaken to this new found understanding often feel an overwhelming clarity in re-reading their Bibles, but many tend to fall into what I will call the “Christian Lies” syndrome. Many believers find their pastor’s lack of understanding when it comes to Torah keeping, not only disconcerting, but a blatant disregard for the truth of the Word. They feel lied to, and begin to have suspicions about many things “Christian.” This is almost a natural instinct, as so many things begin to change at once. Sunday gatherings are now on Saturday. Christmas and Easter are replaced with the appointed times of the Lord. Titles like “Christian” are replaced with “Hebrew Roots,” “Messianic,” and the list goes on.

Within this change many things become suspect. And with no lack of self-made internet scholars to guide the newly awakened believer down the path of ignorance, many missteps are made. Recently I saw some comments on a Facebook post that claimed several points. First, the term Christian was never used by first century believers, and second, the name Jesus was a pagan name. When I searched a bit further in this post, I found a common belief within the Hebrew Roots movement that goes something like this.

1) Yeshua is the name of the Messiah. The name “Jesus” is an invention of Satan, put in place through the Church in order to take us away from the true Messiah. The name “Jesus” is really a code for “Hail Zeus” and when used, is invoking a pagan deity. The English letter “J” didn’t come around until the 16th century. How could this have anything to do with the real name of Yeshua?!?

2) The Apostolic Scriptures (New Testament) were written in Hebrew or Aramaic and therefore the term “Christian” is a translation of what would really be a semitic word translated into English as “Messianic.” The label “Christian” is Greek and would only be used by pagans. Therefore, the term “Christian” or even the title “Christ” is pagan in origin.

To many, these claims not only seem plausible, but likely. So lets take a look at these claims one by one.

The Name “Jesus” is a Pagan Name that Comes from “Hail Zeus”

This claim was first presented in a book by Alexander Hislop titled *Two Babylons*, published in the 1800’s. Even though Hislop’s work was quickly exposed as false by scholars, it didn’t go away. More recently a man by the name of Lew White published a book leaning heavily on Hislop’s work titled *Fossilized Customs*. Although Hislop’s work has been shown to be misguided and at times that he even seems to make things up, many in the Hebrew Roots movement still use it as a go-to source. The notion that the name “Jesus” comes from “Hail Zeus” not only shows a lack of understanding of language as a whole, but literally has zero historical evidence to back it up.

With Hislop and White’s work set aside, we are left with the claim that the name “Jesus” is an invention of the Church, and proof of this is that the letter “J” didn’t come into existence until the 16th century. So lets investigate this claim.

As everyone will admit, language is something that evolves over time. This is true not only for English, but also for the semitic languages. Those who claim the name “Jesus” comes from pagan origins do so on the basis of the changes that have come through Greek, French and German creating what was the basis for our modern English language. What these folks seem to forget is that Hebrew and Aramaic also evolved over time. A perfect example of this would be the Hebrew letter *ayin* (ע) which is also represented in ancient semitic languages such as Ugaritic. As in Ugaritic, the Hebrew letter *ayin* originally had a deep guttural sound that was made in the back of the throat. Over time the Hebrew language changed and now the *ayin* is a silent letter. We still see evidence of this change in words like עמרה. For those who know a little Hebrew, you can see this word starts with an *ayin*, but in our English we still call this place “GomorraH.” The *ayin* still retains a “G” sound like it originally did. Does this mean that when we read the Hebrew from a Torah scroll today, we aren’t really reading the Bible because the language changed? Of course not. This is the evolution of language, which is a natural thing.

So is it true that the letter “J” wasn’t part of the English language until the 16th century? Yes, that is true. Originally, J in the Roman alphabet was another form of the letter I. The letter I had the sound of our modern Y. During the 16th century in the romantic languages, the I and J shifted and split. The J began to be used for the sound “jeh” and the I shifted to a vowel. Because of cursive writing the J and the I became distinguished and the shift took full form.¹ This split into our modern English form of J is important for understanding the name Jesus as we have it today. To understand how we get “Jesus” from “Yeshua” we will need to look at the Hebrew and Greek.

The name Yeshua in Hebrew and Greek looks like this (remember Hebrew reads right to left:

ע	ו	ש	י		ι	η	σ	οο	ς
a	u	sh	Ye		Y	e	s	oo	s

The “Y” sound in Hebrew (י) can only be represented in Greek with the *iota* and *eta* diphthong. The “e” sound we hear in “Ye” does not come through in Greek quite the same, but is represented by *iota* and *eta* diphthong as well. In Greek there is no “sh” sound, so the Greek speaker came as close as possible with the *sigma* which has the “s” sound. The long “oo” sound we have in the Hebrew does have an equivalent in Greek, and that is the *omicron* coupled with the *upsilon*, which placed together make the “oo” sound the translators were looking for. Finally, we come to the “ah” sound at the end of the name. The obvious question would be, how did the translators mess this up so badly? Contrary to the belief this comes from the name Zeus, this is exactly how it should be. In Greek, names always take what is called the nominative form. Greek uses case endings to alert the reader as to what form a word is in. The first thing a Greek student will learn is the nominative form as this is going to be the subject of a sentence as well as the base form for someone’s name. The other major difference in Greek from English is that of gender. Greek assigns one of three gender choices to every word. Male, female, or neuter. And this is where our change at the end of the name

1. There is a fascinating history of this shift and the history of the letter J in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, p. 1496

comes. In the nominative form, the male case ending is a *sigma*, σ and a female case ending is an *alpha* α . The only way the translators could have put an *alpha* on the end of Yeshua's name to represent that last "ah" sound, is if they wanted to tell their audience He was female. Obviously, this would not work, and thus the male nominative case ending, *sigma*, was attached to the end of the name since Yeshua was in fact a man.

(Editorial Note: It has been pointed out that there are names that end with alpha in the masculine form. For instance, Eliah comes into Greek as *Elias*. Although there are several reasons why Greek might have dropped the alpha on the end of the name Jesus, any suggestion I could make would be speculation on my part, as the New Testament writers were not the ones to make these decisions. The transliteration of these names goes back to ancient Jewish Greek centuries prior to the writing of the NT. The name Jesus has a sigma in the nominative form, but not in other forms such as the genitive. Although there is no alpha present in the transliteration of the name Yeshua, there would still be a sigma on the end of the name in the nominative form.)

With the change in language to the I and J which I mentioned above, the Greek name "Iēsus" was changed to "Jesus" as the J was seen as a consonant and not a vowel. The name "Jesus" is nothing more than a perfectly natural transliteration of the Greek name "Iēsus," which in turn is the best possible transliteration of the Hebrew name "Yeshua." The notion that the name "Jesus" comes from "Hail Zeus" or that this name carries with it some form of paganism is extremely ignorant and has no factual evidence to back it up.

Yet, some might argue that the Apostolic Scriptures were written in Hebrew or Aramaic, and therefore, this name is once again taken from a Greek culture and somehow carries with it pagan roots. For this, we will now turn to the next objection.

The Apostolic Scriptures Were Written in Aramaic/Hebrew

Among the Hebrew Roots and Messianic circles many consider this to be a fact. Most people will argue that Yeshua and His disciples were Jews living in Israel, and of course they were speaking Hebrew. Is there truth to this? Yes, there is some truth in this. Yeshua most certainly did speak Aramaic and we see this from the Scriptures themselves. It is likely that He spoke Hebrew as well, but evidence shows that Hebrew was mostly used in the Synagogues for liturgical purposes within Judea and for reading Torah, but not much beyond this. The bigger question is this: "Were the Gospels written in Hebrew or Aramaic?" To this we can most certainly say no. I am fully aware that there is mixed perspectives on this within scholarship, but the vast majority of scholars agree that the Gospels were written in Greek. How can this be?

First, there is literally zero evidence of any Gospel be penned in Hebrew or Aramaic.² The earliest manuscript that we have of a New Testament book in Aramaic is the 13th century C.E. (or later), almost 1200 years or more after the Gospels were written. We do have plenty of 2nd, 3rd, and 4th century manuscripts written in Greek.

Second, we know that Greek was the *lingua franca* of the day, even within Israel. In the Gospels themselves we can see that Yeshua and Nicodemus were speaking Greek and not Aramaic. Nicodemus is called "The teacher of Israel" and certainly Yeshua could have spoken Aramaic, but they spoke Greek with each other.³

2. I know many will turn to the references to a Hebrew Matthew or a Hebrew Gospel, I will touch on this below.

3. For a full treatment of this argument see Rob Vanhoff's article "Did Yeshua Converse

Third, Yeshua tells His disciples to make disciples of the nations (Matt. 28:19). Hebrew and Aramaic were prevalent within Judea among the Jews, but even the Jewish people in the rest of Israel spoke Greek. Writing in Hebrew would be the last thing a person would do in order to reach people outside of Judea.

with Nicodemus in Greek?": <https://www.torahresource.com/pdf-articles/did-yeshua-converse-with-nicodemus-in-greek.pdf> (Last checked 8/22/17)

Oskar Skarsaune puts it quite eloquently:

Archaeology provides some telling illustrations. Many inscriptions have been found on ossuaries, dating roughly from the 200 years prior to A.D. 135. These inscriptions were intended to be read by family members, and one must presume they were written in the language most familiar to the family... This should be no surprise to a reader familiar with the New Testament. Two of Jesus' disciples have Greek names—Philip and Andrew—and precisely these two disciples wanted to introduce some “Greeks” (possibly Gentile God-fearers of Greek-speaking proselytes) to Jesus (Jn 12:20-22)... In Jesus, the Messiah, the biblical promises were fulfilled or brought near their fulfillment; now the time had come to gather in ‘a people for his name’ (Acts 15:14) among the Gentiles. Thus, there is nothing un-Jewish about the fact that the New Testament was written in Greek. On the contrary, to write the message of Jesus in Hebrew and Aramaic would have meant to restrict it to a rather narrow audience consisting of native speakers of these languages, which would have been contrary to the spirit of Judaism in this age.⁴

Yet the evidence that points to Greek originals of the Gospels, and the complete lack of evidence for Aramaic or Hebrew primacy doesn't seem to sway those in the Hebrew Roots that are convinced that these books were written in a “Holy Language.”⁵ Perhaps the largest piece of evidence in favor of Aramaic/Hebrew⁶ primacy is the reference to a “Hebrew Matthew” or a “Hebrew Gospel” by the Church Fathers. To this we now turn.

The Church Fathers⁷

Many people try to side step the church fathers' statements about the first gospel being written in Hebrew. The fact is that there is reference to some kind of “Hebrew Gospel” from the 2nd century all the way to the 10th century.

The tradition of an original Gospel written in Hebrew is attested by twenty church fathers - Ignatius, Papias, Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Pantaeus, Hegesippus, Hippolytus, Origen, Eusebius of Caesarea, Ephrem of Syria, Didymus of Alexandria, Epiphanius, John Chrysostom, Jerome, Theodoret, Marius Mercator, Philip Sidetes, the

4. Oskar Scarsaune, *In the Shadow of the Temple: Jewish Influences on Early Christianity*, InterVarsity 2002, p. 41-43

5. It should be noted that I don't believe Hebrew to be a holy language. This is a rabbinic invention, but Hebrew was a common semitic language in the ANE. It is no more holy than Greek or even English.

6. From now on I will refer to “Aramaic” primacy, but this could just as well be “Hebrew” primacy.

7. This following section was previously presented in an article I wrote titled, “In What Language Were the Synoptic Gospels Written In?” <https://www.torahresource.com/pdf-articles/did-yeshua-converse-with-nicodemus-in-greek.pdf>

Venerable Bede, Nicephorus, and Sedulius Scottus. When references to the Hebrew Gospel by Pope Damasus, the Islamic Hadith, the scholia of sinaiticus, and tractate b.*Shabbat* 116 in the Babylonian Talmud are added to this number, the list lengthens to over two dozen different witnesses....

The Hebrew Gospel is therefore identified by name in at least two dozen patristic sources. Each source mentions it at least once, and most mention it several times.

Twelve fathers attribute the Hebrew Gospel to the apostle Matthew, and eleven specify that it was written in Hebrew.⁸

These are quotes from the third chapter in James Edwards book. In his first two chapters Edwards gives a complete list, break down, and quote of every single reference to the “Hebrew Gospel” that is attributed to the church fathers. His work is precise and in-depth. It might be easy to try to explain away one or even several references by church fathers, but over two dozen? And over a period of nine centuries?

Edward's work on this subject is magisterial. He logically shows that there, in fact, was a Hebrew Gospel. He quotes from Origen (185-254 C.E) and states:

Origen's work concentrates overwhelmingly on the Four canonical Gospels, but on occasion he refers (and not disapprovingly) to non-canonical Gospels. Among these are Gospel of Peter, the Protoevangelium of James, and the Gospel of the Hebrews.⁹

In this statement Edwards explains that Origen not only does most of his work on the four gospels, that is, the four gospels we have today, but that he references non-canonical works. Within these non-canonical works he mentions the “Gospel to the Hebrews.” Why would Origen speak of the Gospel of Matthew (i.e. the canonical gospel that appears as the first book in our Apostolic Scriptures today) as a canonical book, but at the same time compare it with non-canonical works?

In reference to Clement of Alexandria (150-215 C.E) Edwards says:

The saying preserved by Clement can scarcely be a compilation from the Gospels, since three-fifths of it is absent from the Gospels. The sayings preserved by Clement certainly derive, just as he attested, from the Hebrew Gospel¹⁰

Here Edwards has shown a quote that Clement has given from the “Hebrew Gospel.” He explains that the quote gives far too much substance to be from the canonical gospels. And since Clement says that this saying is from the “Hebrew Gospel,” it must be just that—from the Hebrew Gospel. This statement shows that quotes given from the “Hebrew Gospel” do not match with our synoptic gospels, but seem to be from a gospel all to itself.

When looking at Eusebius (260-340 C.E.) Edwards writes:

8. James Edwards, *The Hebrew Gospel & the Development of the Synoptic Tradition* (Eerdmans, 2009) p.102-103

9. Ibid. p. 17

10. Ibid. p 14

In contrast to burgeoning Gentile Christianity, such Jewish converts—and particularly the Ebionites—either preferred the Hebrew Gospel to the canonical Gospels or used it exclusively. In the canonical debates of the Gentile church, the canonical Gospels were “recognized,” whereas the Hebrew Gospel was “disputed,” but among the Ebionites the reverse seems to have been the truer.¹¹

In quoting Eusebius, Edwards shows that the Ebionites preferred the Hebrew Gospel as opposed to the canonical gospels. By this time the canon of the Apostolic Scriptures, and more specifically the acceptance of the gospels, had been secured.¹² Edwards shows many more examples like these in his first two chapters. In addition to Edward’s work on the Hebrew Gospel, F.F. Bruce Writes:

A word may be added about the Gospel according to the Hebrews which, as was mentioned above, Origen listed as one of the books which in his day were disputed by some. This work, which circulated in Transjordan and Egypt among the Jewish-Christian groups called Ebionites, bore some affinity to the canonical Gospel of Matthew. Perhaps it was an independent expansion of an Aramaic document related to our canonical Matthew; it was known to some of the early Christian Fathers in a Greek Version. Jerome (347-420) identified this ‘Gospel according to the Hebrews’ with one which he found in Syria, called the the Gospel of the Nazarenes, and which he mistakenly thought at first was the Hebrew (or Aramaic) original of Matthew.¹³

It is beyond doubt that the “Hebrew Gospel” was one that did not make it into our canon. I have argued in another article¹⁴ that I believe this Hebrew Gospel to be the source document used by the Synoptic writers that explain the Synoptic problem.

Conclusion

The assertion that the English name “Jesus” comes from pagan origins, or that the letter “J” proves it can not be the name of our Lord, shows a lack of understanding of history and the biblical languages. Those who ascribe to such fantasies have been caught up with the idea that anything that has to do with the Christian Church is bad. Rather, the name “Jesus” is a transliteration of the Hebrew name Yehsua, just as ἰησοῦς (iēsus) is a transliteration of the same name into Greek. Beyond this, the belief that the Apostolic Scriptures were written in Aramaic or Hebrew is unfounded and lacks *any* evidence whatsoever. If those within the Torah movement want to be taken seriously, they cannot rest their belief on something that

11. Ibid. p. 18-19

12. Paul Wagner, *The Journey from Text to Translations* P. 140-142. There are few that might dispute a canonization by this time, and even fewer who would dispute that the four gospels were excepted as canon, but the majority of scholars would agree with my dating.

13. F. F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?* (Inter-Varsity Press, 1960) pp. 29-30

14. <https://www.torahresource.com/pdf-articles/did-yeshua-converse-with-nicodemus-in-greek.pdf>

sounds good, or because they really, really believe it. If this were the case than we would have to completely reevaluate the “facts” about Mormonism or even Islam as both of these beliefs tend to rewrite history, yet the followers of both beliefs have true convictions based upon their erroneous writings. Rather, if we want our friends and family to listen and accept what we are telling them, we need to have our beliefs founded on truth, history, and finally on the Word of God. Pedaling the same nonsense because some self-proclaimed internet teacher makes it sound good is no reason to continue the falsehood and reject the truth.