

The Personal Name of the Messiah

A Summary Paper

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The Messiah is not given a personal name in the Tanakh. He does, of course, have many titles, such as "Seed,"¹ "Star,"² "Branch of Yahweh,"³ "Sprout,"⁴ "Root of Jesse,"⁵ et al. The rabbis in the Talmud also suggested some names, but they too are in the nature of titles:⁶

Rab said: The world was created only on David's account. Samuel said: On Moses account; R. Johanan said: For the sake of the Messiah. What is his [the Messiah's] name? – The School of R. Shila said: His name is Shiloh, for it is written, until Shiloh come.⁷ The School of R. Yannai said: His name is Yinnon, for it is written, His name shall endure for ever: e'er the sun was, his name is Yinnon.⁸ The School of R. Haninah maintained: His name is Haninah, as it is written, Where I will not give you Haninah.⁹ Others say: His name is Menahem the son of Hezekiah, for it is written, *Because Menahem ['the comforter'], that would relieve my soul, is far.*¹⁰ The Rabbis said: His name is 'the leper scholar,' as it is written, *Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem him a leper, smitten of God, and afflicted.*¹¹

However, we believe that Jesus is the Messiah of Israel, and "Jesus" is the Anglicized version of the personal name given to him by Joseph as recorded in the New Testament (*Berith Chadasha*). But "Jesus" does not sound very Jewish. Nevertheless, not only was this man born Jewish, but his name in Hebrew was *Yeshua*, which is very Jewish. This name was chosen by God himself and was given to Yeshua "because he will save his people from their sins" (Matthew 1:20-21). What is the origin and meaning of this name? How did it come into English as "Jesus"? A bit of history is required in order to understand the

1 Genesis 3:15.

2 Numbers 24:17.

3 Isaiah 4:2

4 Isaiah 11:1.

5 Isaiah 11:10.

6 Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 98b, from the translation by H. Freedman, edited by Rabbi Dr. I. Epstein (<http://www.come-and-hear.com/sanhedrin>).

7 Genesis 49:10.

8 Psalm 72:17, the Niphal verb *have increase*.

9 Jeremiah 16:13, the feminine noun *favor*.

10 Lamentations 1:16.

11 Isaiah 53:4.

answers.

The original name of "Joshua," son of Nun and successor to Moses, was **הוֹשֵׁעַ** (in plain English letters, Hoshea), which is derived from the verb **יָשַׁע** (*to save, to deliver*) and therefore means *salvation* or *deliverance*.¹² At some point Moses changed his successor's name from Hoshea to **יְהוֹשֻׁעַ**, transliterated *Yəhōšū'a*.¹³ The *ə* is sometimes called a "reduced vowel"¹⁴ (pronounced like the "e" in "because"), the *ô* is long as in "oh," and the accent is on the second full syllable (*šū* = "shu"). In plain English letters, this would be Yehoshua. This is the Hebrew name for Joshua in Exodus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, 1 Kings 16:34, and 1 Chronicles 7:27.

יְהוֹשֻׁעַ or occasionally **יְהוֹשֻׁעַ**¹⁵ (Yehoshua) is a "theophoric expansion"¹⁶ into a so-called "sentence name" formed by prefixing **יְהוָה** (Yah), short for **יְהוָה** (Yahweh), the personal name of God. The rest of **יְהוֹשֻׁעַ** is apparently derived from **יָשַׁע** (*to save*).¹⁷ Thus **יְהוֹשֻׁעַ** (Yehoshua) means *Yahweh saves* or *Yahweh is salvation*.¹⁸

¹² Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), p. 448. This was also the name of the prophet Hosea (Hosea 1:1) and the last king of Israel (2 Kings 15:30).

¹³ See Numbers 13:8, 16. It is not known when the name change occurred. However, Joshua is never called Hoshea except in Numbers 13:8, 16 and Deuteronomy 32:44.

¹⁴ So called by Thomas O. Lambdin, *Introduction to Biblical Hebrew* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1971), p. xxv. Moshe Greenberg, *Introduction to Hebrew* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1965), p. 21, calls it a "mobile shewa."

¹⁵ The first form with the *Qibbus* is by far the more common (Exodus 17:9,10,13,14; 24:13; 32:17; 33:11; Numbers 11:28; Deuteronomy 1:38; Joshua 1:1; etc.). The second form using the *matres lectionis* occurs in Deuteronomy 3:21 and Judges 2:7.

¹⁶ R. Dennis Cole, *Numbers in The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2000), p. 218, n. 121.

¹⁷ The etymology is not certain. The view stated above is that of Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, p. 221: "it came to be associated with **יָשַׁע**"; Werner Foerster, "Ἰησοῦς," in Gerhard Kittel, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1965), III:289, agrees with BDB.

¹⁸ Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, p. 221. Note: the meaning of the name is *not* "salvation," as some popular Christian sources carelessly claim.

In post-exilic times, יהושע (Yehoshua) was generally shortened to ישוע, transliterated *Yēšū'a*. The *ē* in the first syllable is pronounced as the "e" in "they," and the accent is on the second syllable (*šū* = "shu"). In plain English letters, this would be Yeshua. The evidence that it is a shortened form, or diminutive, of the longer name and not a distinct name is fairly strong. First, Moses' successor, the son of Nun, was called by this shorter form in Nehemiah 8:17, after being called by the longer form in Exodus through Judges. But even more significant is the fact that the post-exilic high priest who returned with Zerubbabel was always called by the long form in Haggai and Zechariah, but always by the short form in Ezra and Nehemiah.¹⁹

Therefore, the long and short forms are essentially the same name, but since they are spelled differently in the Hebrew text, English translations sometimes distinguish them. For example, as a general policy the NIV uses "Jeshua" for the short form of the name and "Joshua" for the long form.²⁰ Although "y" is the better transliteration of the Hebrew letter *yodh*, historically "j" was used, at least in names.

The Septuagint (or LXX), the pre-Christian, Jewish translation of the

¹⁹The long form does not occur in the Aramaic portions of the Tanakh. The short form does occur for Zerubbabel's high priest in Aramaic in Ezra 5:2, and the spelling is identical to the Hebrew (see Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, p. 1096).

²⁰However, the NIV makes an exception in Nehemiah 8:17, which has the short form for the son of Nun, successor to Moses. Apparently, since this man is the most prominent character in the Bible with this name, both the long and short versions of it, when referring to him, are rendered as "Joshua" in the NIV. In connection with Zerubbabel's high priest, the NIV remains true to its pattern: the short form is rendered "Jeshua" in Ezra and Nehemiah, and the long form is rendered "Joshua" in Haggai and Zechariah. Five other men with this name are mentioned in the post-exilic books of the Tanakh: (1) 1 Chronicles 24:11; (2) 2 Chronicles 31:15; (3) Ezra 2:6; (4) Ezra 2:40; (5) Nehemiah 3:19 (see D. F. Roberts, "Jeshua, Jeshuah," *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* [Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1982], II:1033). All are the short form, and all are called "Jeshua" in the NIV.

Tanakh into Greek,²¹ transliterates both the long form, Yehoshua,²² and the short form, Yeshua,²³ as Ἰησοῦς (*Iesous*). Also, the New Testament uses Ἰησοῦς as the name of Joshua, the son of Nun.²⁴ This Greek form, in turn, is used in Matthew to quote the angel who instructs Joseph about Mary's pregnancy and the name for the baby to be born:

She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus (*Iesous*), because he will save his people from their sins.²⁵

Since the short form was generally used in post-exilic times, and transliterated as Ἰησοῦς, the Hebrew (and Aramaic) form for the name of the Messiah in the Greek Scriptures (New Testament) is *Yeshua*, meaning *Yahweh saves*.²⁶

Some Jewish counter-missionaries argue that there is little or no evidence that יְשׁוּעַ was the Hebrew (or Aramaic) name for the "Jesus"

21 Some Jewish "counter-missionaries" claim that the LXX has been "proven" to be a Christian production. However, this dogmatic claim seems to be based more on polemics than scholarship. The fact is that recognized scholars in the highly specialized field of LXX studies differ in their proposals concerning the origin and transmission of the LXX. Thus dogmatism is unjustified. Nevertheless, none of the recognized scholars in LXX studies believe that this Greek translation of the Tanakh is of Christian origin. See Appendix 1, which briefly discusses this issue.

22 E.g., Exodus 24:13; Numbers 13:16; Joshua 1:10; Zechariah 3:1.

23 E.g., Ezra 3:2.

24 Acts 7:45; Hebrews 4:8.

25 NIV, Matthew 1:21.

26 Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, p. 221, associate this meaning with both the long and short forms. God likely chose the name Yeshua because the meaning, "Yahweh saves," was relevant to the mission of the Messiah. However, it does seem to be a relatively common name at the

time: "Up to the beginning of the second century A.D. the name יְשׁוּעַ or Ἰησοῦς was very common among the Jews" (Foerster, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, III:285). Cf. also Acts 13:6. Some Jewish counter-missionaries deny it was a popular name at that time. Of course, whether the name was popular or not is irrelevant. The name יְשׁוּעַ clearly existed in post-exilic times because it was used in Ezra and Nehemiah for the high priest. Moreover, it was transliterated Ἰησοῦς in the LXX. Thus the use of Ἰησοῦς in Matthew's account, which was written in Greek, implies that the יְשׁוּעַ was the actual name given to the baby "Jesus" by the Aramaic-speaking Joseph--whether it was popular or not. Nevertheless, it happens that there is considerable evidence that יְשׁוּעַ = Ἰησοῦς was a popular name. See Appendix 2.

of the New Testament. Their point is not well-taken. Jesus obviously had **some** Hebrew or Aramaic name because he was born a Jew, lived in Israel, and was raised by a Jewish family who spoke Aramaic, not Greek. When Mary (Miriam) called the young boy in for lunch, she certainly did not use the Greek name Ἰησοῦς. But in Matthew's account of his birth and in the four Gospel records in general, he is called Ἰησοῦς because these accounts were written in Greek. The question, therefore, is simply what Hebrew/Aramaic name does this Greek form

imply? At the very least, it implies יהושע (Yehoshua) because Ἰησοῦς is the Greek form used for this name (belonging to "Joshua," the son of Nun) in the LXX version of *the Torah*, which everyone agrees was a Jewish translation, probably dating from the 3rd century B.C.

However, since "Joshua," the post-exilic high priest, is called ישוע

(Yeshua) in Ezra and Nehemiah, but יהושע (Yehoshua) in Haggai and

Zechariah, and since ישוע appears only in post-exilic texts,²⁷ it

seems likely that ישוע was the more common form of the name יהושע in post-exilic times. There is also evidence from extra-biblical

sources that ישוע = Ἰησοῦς was a relatively common Jewish name at the time of the birth of the "Jesus" of the Gospels.²⁸ Therefore, the most likely conclusion to draw is that the Hebrew/Aramaic name for

this "Jesus" was ישוע (Yeshua). The only other possible alternative

would be the full form, יהושע (Yehoshua).²⁹

The Anglicized name "Jesus" is a transliteration of the Greek Ἰησοῦς (*Iesous*), but not a direct one. The route was first through Latin as *Iesus* and then into English, where the "Ie" became a "J."

Today, most Jewish believers in Yeshua HaMashiach prefer the Hebrew/Aramaic version of his name, Yeshua,³⁰ rather than the English

27 See footnote 9. Counting "Joshua" the post-exilic high priest, six different men have this short form, and all are in post-exilic texts.

28 See footnote 14.

29 It is quite suggestive that Yeshua of Nazereth was given the same name as "Joshua," the postexilic high priest. This Joshua was one of the "symbolic" men in a well-attested Messianic passage, Zechariah 3:8-10. Moreover, Joshua is clearly symbolic of the Messiah in 6:9-12.

30 Some Messianic Jewish groups write Yeshua as *Yshua* or *Y'shua*, implying that the

"e" is a *shewa* in Hebrew. That is not correct. The "e" is the vowel *sere*, a full vowel pronounced as the "e" in *they*.

31 Jewish counter-missionaries sometimes accuse mission organizations and Messianic congregations of using Jewish terminology, including the Hebrew name Yehsua, as part of a deceptive campaign to "convert" Jews to Christianity by trying to make their language more "Jewish." On the contrary, missionaries to the Jewish people are sincere, honest, and intend no deception when they call upon Jewish people to accept Jesus as the Messiah of Israel. Rather, these Messianic Jewish believers and congregations not only use the Hebrew/Aramaic name of the Messiah, but also observe the Jewish holidays and conduct worship services with a more Jewish liturgy all in order to maintain their connection with their Jewish heritage. For the last several decades Jewish believers have resisted the unnecessary "Gentilizing" of believers in the Messiah of Israel that has generally characterized the church for centuries.

Appendix 1

The Origin and Transmission of the Septuagint

There are several schools of thought regarding the origin of the Septuagint (abbreviated LXX).

The **traditional account** of the translation of the Torah (only) into Greek is the so-called Letter of Aristeas, purportedly written in the 3rd century B.C. An analysis of this letter and an English translation can be found in a number of sources.³² Present consensus places its date in the 2nd century B.C. In the letter, the Torah was supposedly translated by 72 Jewish scholars, six from each tribe. However, scholars vigorously debate the purpose and historical accuracy of the letter. According to Soderlund,

Although it may be difficult to disentangle fact from fiction in Aristeas and equally difficult to determine his original intent, most would agree that the story at least constitutes one bit of evidence for the translation of the Pentateuch in Alexandria in the 3rd cent. B.C.³³

In reviewing modern theories of the origin of the LXX, Soderlund goes on to state, "The absence of reliable firsthand information on the origins of the LXX makes the reconstruction of its early history speculative."³⁴ There are three main schools of thought.

1. In **Thackeray's** scheme (1921), the historical core in the Letter of Aristeas is accepted, placing the translation of the Torah in the 3rd century B.C. He then argued that in the next century the Latter Prophets were translated to support the synagogue practice of reading a second lesson from the Prophets to illustrate the reading from the Law. The translation of the Former Prophets came next, with the translation of Writings coming last. He concluded that most of the OT existed in Greek by the late 2nd century B.C.
2. In the view of **P. de Lagarde**, called the founder of modern LXX studies, "behind the mass of scribal recensitional variants of the present MSS [of the LXX] lies an original Greek Ur-text which can be approximately recovered by the use of predetermined text-critical principles. This view was bequeathed to the Septuaginta-Unternehmen--a research center established in Göttingen to pursue

³² See, e.g., R. H. Charles, *The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1913), volume II, *Pseudepigrapha*, pp. 83-122.

³³ S. K. Soderlund, "Septuagint," *The International Standard Encyclopedia* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1988), IV:402.

³⁴ Ibid.

LXX studies."³⁵

3. **Paul Kahle** argued against the "Lagardian hypothesis" and proposed that the LXX was not the result of an official translation of any sort but instead "arose in a manner analogous to the Aramaic Targums; i.e., several competing translations for each book existed side by side until they were superseded by an official revision."³⁶ Archer adds the following:

Kahle doubts that there was, apart from the Torah, any single standard Old Greek version, but inclines to the view that it was the early church which assembled a standard text from various Old Greek versions already current.³⁷

Soderlund concludes, "In the present state of knowledge the Göttingen approach is assuredly the correct one and appears beyond reasonable challenge."³⁸

However, notice on each of these views, old Greek translations of Jewish origin existed prior to the birth of Jesus and Christianity.

Wevers in his article draws the same conclusion:

The Greek OT as it exists today is a composite book, the work of various translators of various ability who worked at different times. The whole OT was probably complete by the middle, certainly by the end, of the second century B.C. It is generally held that the provenance of all of them was Egypt, a likely though not fully certain presupposition.³⁹

Of course, in the *preservation* of the LXX, the main manuscripts extant today are part of the major texts of the New Testament: Vaticanus (B), Sinaiticus (Ⲛ), and Alexandrinus (A). But as Soderlund notes,

In the 20th cent...numerous papyri have been discovered; some are from the 1st and 2nd cent. B.C. and thus antedate the chief uncials and the Christian 'takeover' of the LXX.⁴⁰

This "takeover" was the result of Jewish abandonment of the LXX:

35 Ibid., IV:403.

36 Ibid.

37 Gleason L. Archer, Jr., *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1974), p. 45.

38 Soderlund, "Septuagint," *The International Standard Encyclopedia*, IV:404.

39 J. W. Wevers, "Septuagint," *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1962), IV:276.

40 Ibid.

"When the Christian Church adopted the LXX as its Bible and began to cite proof texts from it in controversies with the Jews (e.g., *parthénos* [*virgin*] in Isa. 7:14), the latter were considerably embarrassed and retorted that the LXX was an inaccurate translation."⁴¹

Thus Judaism needed another Greek translation. One of these, probably the earliest, was the version of Aquila (d. ca. A.D. 150), influenced by Rabbi Akiba (ca. 50 - ca. 135 A.D.).

This history explains why the old Greek translations, which were of Jewish origin and collectively referred to as the LXX, were "taken over" and preserved primarily in Christian manuscripts.

⁴¹ Ibid.

Appendix 2

Was **ישוע** a Common Name at the time of Jesus?

Werner Foerster gives a thorough historical study of the name **ישוע** = Ἰησοῦς in his article, "Ἰησοῦς," in the ten-volume, standard scholarly work, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*.⁴² The first two headings in his article represent the salient points for this appendix.

1. "The Greek form of a list of OT characters who in pre-exilic Hebrew are called **יהושע** [Yehoshua] and usually after the Exile **ישוע** [Yeshua]"⁴³

This point was discussed in the main paper.

2. "Up to the beginning of the 2nd century A.D. the name **ישוע** or Ἰησοῦς was very common among the Jews."⁴⁴

Among the facts cited by Foerster under this heading are the following:

- "Among the 72 translators of the LXX according to Ep. Ar. (48, 49) [Letter of Aristeas], three bear the name of Ἰησοῦς."
- "Jos. mentions some 20 of the name, including ten contemporaries of Jesus."
- "The pap. of the Jewish colony of Apollonopolis (1st-2nd cent. A.D.) yield many examples."
- Several other men in addition to Jesus of Nazareth are called Ἰησοῦς in the New Testament: "Joshua the son of Eliezer" (Luke 3:29, NIV), the Jewish sorcerer "Bar-Jesus" (Acts 13:6, NIV), and "Jesus" one of Paul's helpers (Colossians 4:11).

⁴² *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 10 volumes, edited by Gerhard Kittel, translated from the German by Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1965), III:284-293.

⁴³ Ibid., III:284.

⁴⁴ Ibid., III:285.

However, Foerster observes that "with the 2nd century A.D. ישוע or Ἰησους disappears as a proper name."⁴⁵ He goes on to add,

In Rabbinic literature ישוע is found only as the name of the 9th priestly class; elsewhere we always have the full יהושוע, which is borne by quite a number of rabbis.⁴⁶

Next, Foerster points out that "Jesus of Nazareth is almost always called ישו [Jesu] in Rabbinic writings..." The references given are "Str.-B., I, 63 f. The full name ישוע is found only in T. Chul., 2, 22 and 24."⁴⁷

Where does this name, ישו come from?

To regard ישו as merely a transcription of the Greek Ἰησους creates both linguistic and material difficulties. σ is usually transcribed ס, and the ς ending is usually carried over; it is also hard to suppose that the Rabbis had to learn the name Jesu from the Greek Church.⁴⁸

What then does Foerster conclude?

The three facts that Ἰησους begins to drop out of the Greek sphere after the beginning of the 2nd century A.D., that the Rabbis return to the older form of the name [יהושוע], and that in the Talmud the singular form ישו is used only for Jesus of Nazareth, cannot be separated from one another, and they seem to be explained best by the theory that the name of Jesus is consciously avoided. ישו instead ישוע is an assimilation to the

45 Ibid., III:286.

46 Ibid.

47 Ibid., III:386, n. 27.

48 Ibid., III:387.

Greek Ἰησους.⁴⁹

Therefore, the historical evidence leads to the following conclusions.

- The name יֵשׁוּעַ = Ἰησους was a common Jewish name at the time Jesus of Nazareth was born and up until the 2nd century A.D.
- After the 2nd century A.D., the rabbis apparently made an effort to avoid this name by returning to the longer form, יְהוֹשֻׁעַ, and almost always referring to Jesus of Nazareth as יֵשׁוּ, a name not found in the Tanakh.

⁴⁹ Ibid.