



HAL
open science

Yešu or Yešua^c? A Sketch of the History of Jesus' Names in Hebrew from Antiquity to the Present

Eran Shuali

► **To cite this version:**

Eran Shuali. Yešu or Yešua^c? A Sketch of the History of Jesus' Names in Hebrew from Antiquity to the Present. *Revue des études juives*, 2020, 179 (1-2), pp.161-179. 10.2143/REJ.179.1.3287593 . hal-03709488

HAL Id: hal-03709488

<https://hal.science/hal-03709488>

Submitted on 29 Jun 2022

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

***Yešu* or *Yešua* ‘? A Sketch of the History of Jesus’ Names in Hebrew from Antiquity to the Present**

Eran Shuali

Faculté de Théologie protestante, UR 4378, Université de Strasbourg

ABSTRACT

In this article, I propose an overview of the history of the names used for Jesus in Hebrew from the time of the historical Jesus and the early Christian movement to the present. I focus on the role of Jewish and Christian mutual perceptions in shaping both the actual ways in which Jesus was named in Hebrew throughout the ages and the conceptions regarding his different Hebrew names.

RÉSUMÉ

Dans cet article, je propose un aperçu de l’histoire des noms employés pour Jésus en hébreu depuis le temps du Jésus historique et du mouvement chrétien primitif et jusqu’à l’époque contemporaine. Je m’intéresse particulièrement à la manière dont les perceptions réciproques de juifs et de chrétiens ont participé à façonner l’appellation de Jésus en hébreu au cours des siècles ainsi que les conceptions relatives aux différents noms hébraïques de Jésus.

It is common knowledge that in Hebrew two different although interrelated names are widely used to denote Jesus of Nazareth: *Yešu* and *Yešua* ‘, and that some other names have also sometimes been employed, e.g. *Yehošua* ‘. This plurality has been commented upon in Jewish and Christian writings for many centuries and may be familiar to contemporary speakers of Modern Hebrew. In this article, I wish to attempt a broad overview of the history of Jesus’ names in Hebrew from the time of the historical Jesus and the early Christian movement to the present,¹ highlighting major tendencies both in the ways in which Jesus has in fact been named at different times and in the

¹ A previous study on this topic is K. KJÆR-HANSEN, *Studier i navnet Jesus* [Ph.D. dissertation], Aarhus, 1982: <http://www.kaikjaerhansen.dk/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/Studier-i-Navnet-Jesus.pdf> For a shorter presentation in English: K. KJÆR-HANSEN, “Yehoshua, Yehsua, Jesus and Yeshu: An Introduction to the Names”, *Mishkan: A Forum on the Gospel and the Jewish People* 17-18 (1992-1993), p. 23-38.

ways in which his different Hebrew names have been conceived. Through this overview, I wish to show especially how Jewish and Christian mutual perceptions have shaped the naming of Jesus in Hebrew, making this linguistic phenomenon a useful prism through which to consider the intricacies of Jewish-Christian relations. In general, I believe that similar demonstrations can be made regarding most other Hebrew words specifically related to Christianity, e.g. names of other founding figures of Christianity, adjectives used to say “Christian” and terms denoting the Christian Scriptures, but Jesus’ name in Hebrew is perhaps the most emblematic example.

I will focus on the following elements in the history of Jesus’ names in Hebrew: 1. The name of the historical Jesus. 2. Jesus’ names in Jewish tradition as known to us since the Middle Ages. 3. Hypotheses on the formation of this tradition and especially on the origin of the name *Yešū*. 4. Hebrew names used for Jesus by Christians since the Renaissance. 5. The usage in Modern Israeli Hebrew.

In each part, I will attempt to shed light on the main lines of the usage of and conceptions regarding Jesus’ Hebrew names at the different periods and milieus on the basis of an analysis of selected sources. It should be noted that much potential for further research on this topic exists notably concerning contemporary Hebrew using methods designed for analyzing large amounts of linguistic data, such as currently used in corpus linguistics.²

The name of the historical Jesus

For assessing which name the Aramaic and Hebrew speaking Jesus went by in first-century Galilee and Judaea,³ the best evidence at hand is collateral. It may be summarized as follows. In the New Testament writings composed in Greek within the Early Christian movement between the second half of the first century C.E. and the second half of the second century C.E.,⁴ Jesus is systematically named Ἰησοῦς – *Iēsous*, slightly over nine-hundred times.⁵ This is a Greek name of Jewish origin:

² I thank Shiri Lev-Ari for advice on this matter.

³ On the status of Aramaic and Hebrew at the time: S. E. FASSBERG, “Which Semitic Language Did Jesus and Other Contemporary Jews Speak?” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 74/2 (2012), p. 263-280, and bibliography therein.

⁴ Paul’s First Letter to the Thessalonians written around 50 C.E. is generally considered to be the earliest book in the New Testament corpus. The Second Letter of Peter is considered as the latest text in the corpus and its date of composition is estimated around 130 C.E. R. E. BROWN, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, New York, 1997, p. 456-457, 761-762.

⁵ 917 according to BibleWorks.

it first appears in our sources in the Septuagint, where it is mostly used for rendering the Hebrew names *Yehošua*´ and *Yešua*´, which belong to several characters in the Hebrew Bible.⁶ Tal Ilan’s vast survey of Jewish names in Late Antiquity shows that the Greek name *Iēsous* was a common one in Judaea / Palestine at the time of Jesus, for the survey includes evidence on forty-eight different people named *Iēsous* in this geographic area between the third century B.C.E. and the second century C.E.⁷ Moreover, Ilan’s data indicates that of all the Aramaic and Hebrew names connected to the biblical *Yehošua*´, the name *Yešua*´ was clearly the most common one in first and second century Judaea / Palestine. Richard Bauckham analyzed the data thus:

Of the 99 persons bearing the name in Ilan’s list (excluding fictitious persons), there are several of whom more than one different form of the name is used in the sources. The full evidence for the forms of the name therefore in fact constitutes 111 instances. Of these 62 are in Jewish script (Hebrew or Aramaic). There are 17 occurrences of the full name *Yehoshua*´ (יהושע [yhwš´], once יהושע [yhwšw´], once יישובע [yšw´]), 44 of the short form *Yeshua*´ (ישוע [yšw´], once ישועה [yšw´h], once ישועה [yšw´], once שוע [šw´]), and one of the very short *Yeshu* (ישו [yšw]). This shows that the form *Yeshua*´ was much the most popular. However, we should also note that 15 occurrences of the full form *Yehoshua*´, while referring to persons in our period, occur in rabbinic literature (Mishna, Tosefta, and the Talmuds), while the remaining two are on incantation bowls (...). These cases may well not be good evidence of the *form* of the name used in our period. As Tal Ilan comments, “The use of יהושע [yhwš´] in the later literary sources may well be seen as a return to the traditional Old Testament pre-exilic spelling.”⁸

It is therefore statistically probable that a Jew living in the Galilee and Judaea in the first century and called *Iēsous* in Greek was named something like *Yešua*´ in Aramaic and Hebrew, although we must acknowledge that reliable information on the precise pronunciation and spelling of the historical Jesus’ name is lacking.

⁶ In several cases, the name *Iēsous* is also used for rendering other Hebrew names. In addition, the names *Yehoshua*´ and *Yešua*´ are sometimes rendered otherwise into Greek. W. FOERSTER, “Ἰησοῦς”, in G. KITTEL, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 3, trans. G. W. BROMILEY, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1965, p. 284-285.

⁷ T. ILAN, *Lexicon of Jewish Names in Late Antiquity. Part I: Palestine 330 BCE – 200 CE*, Tübingen, 2002, p. 126-133.

⁸ R. BAUCKHAM, “The Names on the Ossuaries”, in C. L. QUARLES, *Buried Hope or Risen Savior: In Search for the Jesus Tomb*, Nashville, Tennessee, 2008, p. 69-112 (80-81). He quotes ILAN, *Lexicon*, p. 129.

Jesus' name in Jewish tradition

The names used for Jesus in Hebrew and Aramaic by Jews are reliably known to us through manuscript sources only starting from the Middle Ages. These names derive undoubtedly from an oral and written tradition going back many centuries, as is attested by the fact that Jesus is mentioned already in the Tosefta and Palestinian Talmud the redaction of which is dated respectively to the late third or early fourth century and to the first half of the fifth century.⁹ Since no Jewish manuscript naming Jesus in Hebrew or Aramaic survives from Late Antiquity, however, it must be acknowledged that the earlier stages of this tradition, namely the situation in tannaitic and amoraic times, may be known to us currently only in a speculative manner. An outline of the different hypotheses on the formation of this tradition will be presented below, following the presentation of the medieval evidence on which they are chiefly based.

In the medieval Jewish sources, the name most commonly used for Jesus is ישו. This name is found, for example, in textual witnesses of the Babylonian and Palestinian Talmuds,¹⁰ of Rashi's commentary on the Babylonian Talmud,¹¹ of David Kimhi's commentary on Psalms.¹² It is also found numerous times in the textual witnesses of different polemical treatises against Christianity.¹³ In some of the manuscripts the name is sometimes topped by special marks, such

⁹ H. L. STRACK, G. STEMBERGER, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, trans. and ed. M. BOCKMUEHL, Minneapolis, 1996, 2nd ed., p. 157, 171.

¹⁰ E.g. y. 'Abod. Zar. 10b in Ms. Leiden dated to 1289: P. SCHÄFER, H.-J. BECKER, *Synopse zum Talmud Yerushalmi. Band IV: Ordnung Neziqin, Ordnung Toharot: Nidda*, Tübingen, 1995, p. 265. On this manuscript: STRACK, STEMBERGER, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, p. 181. B. Sanh. 43a, 103a in Ms. Munich dated to 1343 and Ms. Karlsruhe Reuchlin dated to the 13th cent. Both manuscripts can be viewed on <https://fjms.genizah.org/> (accessed on 19 Dec 2017). Information on them is provided in STRACK, STEMBERGER, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, p. 209-210.

¹¹ E.g. Rashi's commentary on b. Hag. 5b according to Ms. Parma 2244 dated to 1321, f128b; on the manuscript: B. RICHLER, ed., *Hebrew Manuscripts in the Biblioteca Palatina in Parma: Catalogue*, Jerusalem, 2001, entry 743, p. 161-162. Rashi's commentary on b. Meg. 17b, 24b according to Ms. Jewish Theological Seminary 6648 dated to the 15th cent., f21b, f28b. On the manuscript: A. DARMESTETER, D. S. BLONDHEIM, *Les gloses françaises dans les Commentaires talmudiques de Raschi. Tome Premier: Texte des gloses*, Paris, 1929, p. XXIV-XXV.

¹² E.g. Kimhi's commentary on Psalm 45 and 72: S. I. ESTERSON, *The Commentary of Rabbi David Kimhi on Psalms (42-72). Edited on the Basis of Manuscripts and Early Editions*, [Cincinnati, 1935], p. 25-26, 134.

¹³ Examples may be found in Ya'aqobh ben Re'ubhen, *Milhamot HaSem* [Wars of the Lord], ed. J. ROSENTHAL, Jerusalem, 1963; D. J. LASKER, S. STROUMSA, *The Polemic of Nestor the Priest: Qiṣṣat Mujādalat al-Usquf and Sefer Nestor Ha-Komer. II. Introduction and Critical Edition*, Jerusalem, 1996; Šem Ṭob Ibn Šaprut, "La Piedra de Toque" (*Eben Bohan*): *Una obra de controversia judeo-cristiana. Introducción, edición crítica, traducción y notas al libro I*, ed. J.-V. NICLÓS, Madrid, 1997. Many more examples may be found in polemical treatises from the 17th and 18th centuries, which are now easily accessible through K. D. DOBOS' website *Jewish-Christian Polemics in Early Modern Italy*: <http://www.jcrpolemicsinitaly.at/> (accessed on 5 March 2018).

as *Geršayim*, commonly used for indicating foreign words, acronyms, names and other kinds of noteworthy words.¹⁴

Besides *Yešu*, other names may also be found for Jesus. These include יוֹשׁ – maybe a transcription from Latin,¹⁵ and *Yehošua* ‘.¹⁶ The name *Yešua* ‘ is also fairly well attested. It can be found, for example, in Maimonides’ *Mišne Tora*, according to a manuscript authorized by Maimonides himself (Bodleian Library, Ms. Huntington 80):¹⁷

הן מצרין לישראל ומסירין את העם מאחרי ה' כישוע הנצרי ותלמידיו¹⁸

They distress Israel and make the nation turn away from God, like *Yešua* ‘ the Nazarene and his disciples

או שהטעה אחרים והדיחם כישוע¹⁹

Or one that has misled others and seduced them, like *Yešua* ‘

והמבזה רבותיו שדבר זה גורם להן לדחפו ולטרדו כישוע וכגיהזי²⁰

And he who shames his teachers, for this makes them push him away and banish him, like *Yešua* ‘ and Gehazi

In the fourteenth-century Vienna manuscript of the Tosefta, in *Hul.* 2:22, 24:²¹

מעשה בר' לעזר בן רמה שנשכו נחש ובא יעקב איש כפר סמא לרפאתו משום ישוע בן פניטרא

¹⁴ M. BEIT-ARIÉ, *Hebrew Codicology: Historical and Comparative Typology of Medieval Hebrew Codices Based on the Documentation of the Extant Dated Manuscripts Until 1540 Using a Quantitative Approach. Preprint Internet Version 0.7 (December 2017)* (Hebrew), ed. Z. LASMAN, p. 373-374, 391-393.

¹⁵ E.g. the version of Toledot Yešu published in J. HULDREICH, ed., *Historia Jeschuae Nazareni, a Judaeis blaspheme corrupta, ex Manuscripto hactenus inedito nunc demum edita, ac Versione et Notis (quibus Judaeorum nequitiae propius deteguntur, et Authoris asserta ineptiae ac impietatis convicuntur.) illustrata*, Leiden, 1705; *Liber Nizachon Rabbi Lipmanni, Conscriptus anno a Christo nato M.CCC.XCIX. diuque desideratus: nec ita pridem, fato singulari, e Judaeorum manibus excussus*, ed. T. HACKSPAN, Nuremberg, 1644, p. 12. Interestingly, in Yom-Tov Lipmann’s *Sepher Nišahon*, the Hebrew form יוֹשׁ is also used to transcribe from Latin the name *Jesus*, within a transcription of the whole of Matthew 1:16. For evidence on the use of the letter *šin* to transcribe the Latin letter S: P. BOBICHON, *Deux nouveaux documents de polémique judéo-chrétienne. France de Nord, XIII^e siècle: entre tradition et singularité. Paris BNF, Hébreu 712 (ff. 56v-57v et 66v-68v) (édition, traduction, commentaires)*, HDR dissertation, 2011, p. 34.

¹⁶ This name appears, for example, in several versions of Toledot Yešu: MEERSON, SCHÄFER, ed., *Toledot Yeshu: The Life Story of Jesus. Two Volumes and Database*, Tübingen, 2014, p. 142, 143, 147, 217.

¹⁷ On this manuscript: S. M. STERN, “Autographs of Maimonides in the Bodleian Library”, *Bodleian Library Record* 5/4 (1955), p. 180-202 (191-194). The manuscript can be viewed on: <http://maimonides.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/> Other manuscripts of *Mišne Tora* attest both the name *Yešu* and *Yešua* ‘ in these passages.

¹⁸ F78a (*Sefer Mada* ‘, *Abhoda Zara* 10:2).

¹⁹ F85a (*Sefer Mada* ‘, *Teshubha* 3:19).

²⁰ F85b (*Sefer Mada* ‘, *Teshubha* 4:2).

²¹ The manuscript is cited from: <https://www.biu.ac.il/JS/tannaim/> (on 19 December 2017). On this manuscript: STRACK, STEMBERGER, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, p. 158.

A case story about R. Le'azar son of Rama who was bitten by a snake. And Jacob of Kefar Sama' came to heal him in the name of *Yešua* ' son of Panetra' .²²

פעם אחת הייתי מהלך באיסתרטיא של ציפורי מצאתי יעקב איש כפר סכניא ואמ' דבר של מינות משם ישוע בן פנטירא
Once, I was walking on the road of Sepphoris when I came across Jacob of Kefar Sekhania', and he said a word of heresy in the name of *Yešua* ' son of Pantera' .²³

In a Yemenite manuscript of Tractate Sanhedrin of the Babylonian Talmud from the sixteenth or seventeenth century now at Yad HaRav Herzog in Jerusalem:²⁴

(*b. Sanh.* 43a) והתניא בערב הפסח תלאוהו לישוע הנצרי וכרוז יוצא לפניו ארבעים יום ישוע הנצרי יוצא להיסקל
It was taught: On the eve of Passover *Yešua* ' the Nazarene was hanged. And a herald goes forth before him forty days (heralding): “*Yešua* ' the Nazarene is going forth to be stoned...”²⁵

(*b. Sanh.* 103a) שלא יצא ממך בן או תלמיד שמקדיח תבשילו ברבים כגון ישוע הנצרי
May you not have a son or a disciple who publicly burns his food, like *Yešua* ' the Nazarene.

Maybe somewhat unexpectedly, alongside the name *Yešu*, the name *Yešua* ' is widely attested in the different versions of the polemical Jewish tale on Jesus' life commonly called *Toledot Yešu*. In a number of *Toledot Yešu* manuscripts, Jesus is systematically named *Yešua* '. Among these, we find the earliest known Hebrew manuscript of *Toledot Yešu* – Ms. New York JTS 8998, dated to the 15th century at the latest;²⁶ three 18th-19th century Yemenite manuscripts belonging to what the editors of the recent critical edition of *Toledot Yešu* call the “Late Yemenite B” version;²⁷ as well as several additional manuscripts.²⁸ In a number of other manuscripts, Jesus is named both *Yešu* and *Yešua* ' without there being a manifest discursive reason for choosing one name or the other. Among these, there are Ms. St. Petersburg RNL EVR 1.274 from 1536, which is one of the earliest

²² The English translation is based on P. SCHÄFER, *Jesus in the Talmud*, Princeton-Oxford, 2007, p. 54.

²³ The English translation is based on SCHÄFER, *Jesus in the Talmud*, p. 42.

²⁴ On this manuscript: M. SABATO, *A Yemenite Manuscript of Tractate Sanhedrin*, Jerusalem, 1998 (Hebrew). The manuscript is cited from <https://fjms.genizah.org/> (on 19 Dec 2017). In addition to the two pages from which following examples are taken, the name also appears on 107b.

²⁵ The translation is based on *Hebrew-English Edition of the Babylonian Talmud. Sanhedrin*, ed. I. EPSTEIN, trans. J. SHACHTER, H. FREEDMAN, London, 1969, p. 43a.

²⁶ MEERSON, SCHÄFER, ed., *Toledot Yeshu*, vol. II, p. 58.

²⁷ Mss. Jerusalem JNUL Heb. 8° 472; New York JTS 6871 R1037 (Adler 4180); Princeton Firestone Lib. 21. On this version, MEERSON, SCHÄFER, ed., *Toledot Yeshu*, vol. II, p. 113-114.

²⁸ Ms. Manchester Gaster 1989 (the name is written here ישו"ע); three manuscripts of the “Italian B” version, in which Jesus is named, however, only once: Mss. Jerusalem JNUL Heb. 8° 2667; New York JTS 2232; New York JTS 2281.

known manuscripts;²⁹ two manuscripts deriving from or close to the 1705 edition of *Toledot Yešū* published by Johannes Huldreich,³⁰ and the late nineteenth-century Ms. Jerusalem JNUL Heb. 8° 228.³¹ It should be noted that in the aforementioned manuscripts of *Toledot Yešū*, the use of the name *Yešua* ‘ does not seem to attest to an intention to treat Jesus in a particularly favorable manner. For example, in Ms. New York JTS 8998, the name *Yešua* ‘ is followed, in most of its occurrences, by the epithet *HaRaša* ‘ - “the wicked”. In two of the “Late Yemenite B” manuscripts, when the name *Yešua* ‘ is introduced in the birth narrative, it is followed by the phrase שם רשעים ירקב – “may the name of wicked (men) rot”.³²

Furthermore, in quite a few versions of *Toledot Yešū*, it is told that Jesus was named *Yešua* ‘ or *Yehošua* ‘ at birth and that the derogatory nickname *Yešū* was given to him at a later stage. Many of these manuscripts explain this name as an acronym of the Hebrew phrase “May his name and memory be erased”, as in the following example:

לאחר ימים ילדה בן ותקרא את שמו ישוע על שם אחי אמו ולאחר שגדלה חטא\$ט\$תו וקילקולו קראו שמו ישו ר"ל ימח' שמו וזכרו³³

After a while, she bore a son and named him *Yešua* ‘, after his mother’s brother. And after his sin and depravation grew, he was named *Yešū*, i.e. may his name and memory be erased.

It must be noted, however, that at least one other explanation of the derogatory nature of this name may be found:

והנה ילדה מרים בן ותקרא שמו ישוע כשם אחיה של אמה ובשנת שנתגלה קלונה שזנתה קראה שמו יש"ו ר"ל ישית מות עלימו כלומר הלואי שימות שטוב מותו מחייו³⁴

And then Miriam bore a son and named him *Yešua* ‘, like the name of her mother’s brother. And in the year in which was revealed her disgrace, that she had whored, she named him *Yešū*, i.e. “may He bring death upon him” (Ps 55:16), that is, if only he would die, for it is better that he dies than lives.³⁵

²⁹ Y. DEUTSCH, “*Eduyot ‘al Nosah Qadum šel Toledot Yešū*” (New Evidence of Early Versions of *Toledot Yešū*), *Tarbiz* 69/2 (2000), 177-197 (Hebrew); MEERSON, SCHÄFER, ed., *Toledot Yeshu*, vol. II, p. 71-72.

³⁰ Mss. Amsterdam Hs. Ros. 442; Frankfurt Universitätäbibl. Hebr. 249. MEERSON, SCHÄFER, ed., *Toledot Yeshu*, vol. II, p. 238ff. In both manuscripts, Jesus is also occasionally named ישו.

³¹ MEERSON, SCHÄFER, ed., *Toledot Yeshu*, vol. II, p. 12, 254-255.

³² Mss. Jerusalem JNUL Heb. 8° 472; Princeton Firestone Lib. 21.

³³ Ms. New York JTS 1491; MEERSON, SCHÄFER, ed., *Toledot Yeshu*, vol. II, p. 83.

³⁴ Ms. New York JTS 2221; MEERSON, SCHÄFER, ed., *Toledot Yeshu*, vol. II, p. 98. Also in Ms. Amsterdam Hs. Ros. 414.

³⁵ The English translation is based on MEERSON, SCHÄFER, ed., *Toledot Yeshu*, vol. I, p. 187.

Hypotheses on the origin of the name *Yešū* and of the twofold tradition

The unusual name *Yešū* received quite a bit of attention at different times. In general, two kinds of hypotheses have been made regarding its origin and connection to the name *Yešua* ' . First, a common conception among both Jews and Christians is that *Yešū* is a name made up for Jesus by Jews for polemical reasons. We have seen that it is widely conceived in this way in the *Toledot Yešū* tradition. Two slightly different explanations in the same vein may be found, for example, in the Hebrew Lexicon *Tišbi* written by the influential sixteenth-century Jewish Hebraist Elia Levita:

ישו אומרים הנוצרים שמשיחם היה נקרא ישוע בצנאית מלאך גבריאל שיושיע כל העולם מגיהנום. ויש אומרים שהיה נקרא כך במקרה כי כן בזמן שהוא היו יהודים רבים ששמום ישוע כמו שמצינו בעזרא ב' ובהתמיה ג' וי"ב ובדברי הנביאים ב' ל"א ולפי שהיהודים אינם מודים שהוא היה המושיע לפיכך אינם רוצים לקראו ישוע והפילו העין וקורין לו ישו. גם יש לומר לפי שהברת העין קשה לבטא לגוים. כמו שכתב ר"ע שפ"ל מי שאינו למד קריאת הסתת והעין בנערותו לא יוכל לבטא אותם כל ימיו. לפיכך הגוים אינם קורין לו בלשונם ישוע אף ישו או יזוש. לכך קורין לו היהודים גם כן ישו בלי עין.³⁶

Yešū The Christians say that their messiah was called *Yešua* ' by order of the angel Gabriel, for he would save the whole world from hell. And some say that this was his name by chance, for at that time, many Jews were called *Yešua* ' , as we find in Ezra chapter 2,³⁷ and in Nehemiah chapters 3 and 12,³⁸ and in 2 Chronicles chapter 31.³⁹ And since the Jews do not acknowledge that he was the Savior (המושיע), they do not wish to call him *Yešua* ' . They therefore dropped the 'ayin and call him *Yešū*. Furthermore, it should be said that the consonant 'ayin is difficult to pronounce for Gentiles, as Rabbi Ibn Ezra wrote: whoever does not learn to read the *het* and 'ayin in his childhood, will not be able to pronounce them all of his life. The Gentiles, therefore, do not call him in their language *Yešua* ' , but *Yešū* or *Yezus* . This is why the Jews also call him *Yešū* without the 'ayin.

³⁶ E. LEVITA, *Tišbi: Lexicon hebraicum utilissimum, sexcentorum vocabulorum copia vel etiam ultra, instructum, quorum quaedam Hebraica, nonnulla Chaldaica, pleraque; etiam Arabica & Graeca sunt, passim tum in Bibliis, tum Rabbiorum scriptis obuia, hactenus à nemine explicata, sed primum ante paucos annos à doctissimo Iudaeo Elia Leuita Germano utiliter congesta, studiose Hebraicis verbis exposita, ac deinde Hebraeae linguae periti cuiuidam opera latino sermone versa, atque in lucem aedita*, Basel, 1557, p. 151.

³⁷ Ezra 2:2, 6, 36, 40.

³⁸ Nehemiah 3:19; 12:1, 7, 8, 10, 24, 26.

³⁹ 2 Chronicles 31:15.

According to Levita, Jews dropped the final *‘ayin* of the name *Yešua‘* either in order to dissociate it from the Hebrew verb “to save” – ישע, or under the influence of Jesus’ name in European languages, giving it thus a foreign tinge.

Second, since the nineteenth century, some scholars have supposed that *Yešū* reflects the way in which the name *Yešua‘* was pronounced in Antiquity, that is, without the final guttural *‘ayin*. According to them, Jewish tradition therefore provides invaluable access to the way in which the historical Jesus was called by his Aramaic and Hebrew speaking contemporaries, or in Franz Delitzsch’s words: “The Talmud is also the only witness for the native accent of the name. In accordance with it, Jesus was commonly named *Yešū*.”⁴⁰ Similar claims may be found, for example, a century later in works by David Flusser and Joachim Jeremias and lately in a book by Thierry Murcia.⁴¹

A number of elements support this hypothesis, even though they are, in my opinion, not sufficient in order to prove it. 1. The non-pronunciation of *‘ayin*, as well as of other gutturals, and the consequent occasional dropping out of this letter in writing are well attested in Palestine around the turn of the era. For example, in an inscription found in the Jerusalem area, the Hebrew name *Šim‘on* is spelled *Šimon*. The scribe of the Great Isaiah Scroll found at Qumran (1QIsa^a) has written the verb *ya‘abhor* in Isa 28:15 *yabhor*, and the verb *ya‘aseh* in Isa 48:14 *yašeh*.⁴² 2. In Jewish sources, *Yešū* is found twice as the name of people other than Jesus of Nazareth. The name appears on a Jewish ossuary that has been dated to before 70 C.E., where it is written besides a fuller version of the deceased’s name: ישוע בר יהוסף – “*Yešua‘* son of Joseph”.⁴³ It is also attested in a fragment of the Jerusalem Talmud found in the Cairo Genizah mentioning a certain ר' ישו דרומייה – “Rabbi *Yešū* of the south”.⁴⁴ This evidence is scant, but it does open up the possibility that the

⁴⁰ “Der Talmud ist also der einzige Zeuge für den einheimischen Wortlaut des Namens. Ihm zufolge wurde Jesus gemeinhin ישו genannt.” F. DELITZSCH, “Talmudische Studien. XV. Der Jesus-Name”, *Zeitschrift für die gesammte lutherische Theologie und Kirche* 37 (1876), p. 210.

⁴¹ D. FLUSSER, *Jesus in Selbstzeugnissen und Bilddokumenten*, Reinbek bei Hamburg, 1968, p. 13; J. JEREMIAS, *Neutestamentliche Theologie. Ester Teil. Die Verkündigung Jesu*, Gütersloh, 1971, p. 13, n. 1; T. MURCIA, *Jésus dans le Talmud et la littérature rabbinique ancienne*, Turnhout, 2014, p. 389-394.

⁴² These and many more examples are provided and analyzed in E. Y. KUTSCHER, *The Language and Linguistic Background of the Isaiah Scroll (1Q Isa^a)*, Leiden, 1974, p. 91-95, 505-511.

⁴³ E. L. SUKENIK, *Jüdische Gräber Jerusalems um Christi Geburt: Vortrag gehalten am 6. Januar 1931 in der Archäologischen Gesellschaft, Berlin*, Jerusalem, 1931, p. 19; L.-H. VINCENT, “Épitaphe prétendue de N.S. Jésus-Christ”, *Atti della pontificia accademia romana di archeologia: Rendiconti* 7 (1929-1931), p. 213-239; BAUCKHAM, “The Names on the Ossuaries”, p. 81-83.

⁴⁴ L. GINZBERG, ed., *Yerushalmi Fragments from the Genizah*, vol. 1, New York, 1909, p. 93, line 22.

name existed in ancient Jewish society. 3. In several other Semitic parlances, Jesus' name does not end with an 'ayin'.⁴⁵ From the writings of Ephrem, it appears that the Syriac-speaking Marcionites against whom he writes pronounced Jesus' name *Isu*.⁴⁶ In Mandaic, Jesus' name is written 'šu and pronounced *Išu*.⁴⁷ In the Quran, Jesus is named 'Isa'.⁴⁸ If Jesus' name arrived to these parlances via oral transmission in a Semitic language, most probably Aramaic, and not only through the Greek New Testament, then it might attest that in this oral tradition the final 'ayin was not pronounced.

Finally, it should be remarked that the two kinds of hypotheses are not mutually exclusive.⁴⁹ It is possible to imagine a scenario in which *Yešu* was Jesus' real name, and in which this name was retained in Jewish tradition because deprecatory connotations were attributed to it.⁵⁰

Hebrew names used for Jesus by Christians

From the time of Humanism and Reformation at the end of the fifteenth and the beginning of the sixteenth century, a not insignificant number of Christians became actively involved with Hebrew. Christian Hebraists notably studied and taught the language of the Hebrew Bible and succeeded in furthering its understanding significantly, whereas some of them also took interest in Jewish literature of later times, e.g. rabbinic literature, Medieval Jewish exegesis and anti-Christian polemics.⁵¹ In addition, they produced texts in Hebrew often dealing with Christian themes: Hebrew translations of the Christian Scriptures, theological and polemical treatises, poetry,

⁴⁵ This evidence is stressed in MURCIA, *Jésus dans le Talmud et la littérature rabbinique ancienne*, p. 392-394.

⁴⁶ C. W. MITCHELL, A. A. BEVAN, F. C. BURKITT, eds., *S. Ephraim's Prose Refutations of Mani, Marcion, and Bardaisan. Transcribed from the Palimpsest B.M. ADD. 14623*, vol. II, London-Oxford, 1921, p. xxix, n. 1; occurrences of *Isu* in Ephrem's writings are listed in the index, p. clxviii.

⁴⁷ E. S. DROWER, E. MACUCH, *A Mandaic Dictionary*, Oxford, 1963, p. 358; G. DYE, M. KROPP, "Le nom de Jésus (Īsā) dans le Coran, et quelques autres noms bibliques: remarques sur l'onomastique coranique", in G. DYE, F. NOBILIO, eds., *Figures bibliques en islam*, Brussels, 2011, p. 171-198 (186).

⁴⁸ A summary of research on this name is provided in *ibid.*

⁴⁹ I thank Michael Langlois for this insight.

⁵⁰ Such a scenario is put forward by K. KJÆR-HANSEN, "What's in Jesus' Name According to Matthew", *Mishkan: A Forum on the Gospel and the Jewish People* 59 (2009), p. 23-31 (23).

⁵¹ S. G. BURNETT, *Christian Hebraism in the Reformation Era (1500-1660). Authors, Books, and the Transmission of Jewish Learning*, Leiden-Boston, 2012; J. FRIEDMAN, *The Most Ancient Testimony. Sixteenth-Century Christian-Hebraica in the Age of Renaissance Nostalgia*, Athens, Ohio, 1983; H. GZELLA, "Expansion of the Linguistic Context of the Hebrew Bible / Old Testament: Hebrew among the Languages of the Ancient Near East", chapter 6 of *Hebrew Bible / Old Testament: The History of Its Interpretation. Volume III – From Modernism to Post-Modernism (The Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries)*, ed. M. SÆBØ, Göttingen, 2013, p. 134-167.

missionary literature and liturgical texts. Since the twentieth century, several Christian communities in Israel use Hebrew predominantly both in the written material they produce and in oral discourse.

Jesus' Hebrew name attracted the interest of Christian Hebraists from the beginning.⁵² Giovanni Pico della Mirandola hypothesized kabbalistically on the essence of name *Yešu* in his *900 Theses* published in 1486.⁵³ A few years later, in his 1494 *On the Wonder-Working Word (De Verbo Mirifico)*, Johannes Reuchlin conceived a kabbalistic theory attributing to Jesus the name *YHŠWH*, i.e. an augmented form of the tetragrammaton in the middle of which the letter *šin* has been added.⁵⁴ Artistic representations of the trilingual inscription on the cross from the fifteenth and early sixteenth century present various forms for Jesus' Hebrew name: *Yešu*, *Yehošua* ' , *Yešua* ' , *YHŠW*, *YŠ* ' , *YŠW* ' .⁵⁵

Following this initial period of Christian Hebraism, from approximately the middle of the sixteenth century and until the present time, Christians have shown a strong preference for using the name *Yešua* ' for Jesus. This name is used for Jesus in all approximately fifty complete or partial Hebrew translations of the New Testament produced by Christians from the sixteenth to the twenty-first century,⁵⁶ with only two exceptions known to me.⁵⁷ *Yešua* ' is the name most usually used in art of

⁵² I thank *REJ*'s anonymous reader for indications regarding the two following paragraphs.

⁵³ G. PICO DELLA MIRANDOLA, *De adscriptis numero noningentis: Dialecticis: Moralibus: Physicis: Mathematicis: Methaphysicis: Theologicis: Magicis: Cabalisticis: cum suis: tum sapientum Chaldeorum: Arabum: Hebreorum: Graecorum: Aegyptiorum: latinorumque placitis disputabit publice Iohanes Picus Mirandulanus concordie Comes*, Rome, 1486, chap. "Conclusiones Cabalisticæ numero LXXI secundum opinionem propriam: ex ipsis hebreorum sapientum fundanentis Christianam Religionem maxime confirmantes", [conclusions 14, 15]. Commented on in C. WIRSZUBSKI, *Pico della Mirandola's Encounter with Jewish Mysticism*, Cambridge, Massachusetts – London, 1989, p. 218.

⁵⁴ D. H. PRICE, *Johannes Reuchlin and the Campaign to Destroy Jewish Books*, Oxford, 2011, p. 63-64, 83-85; F. SECRET, *Les kabbalistes chrétiens de la Renaissance*, Paris, 1964, p. 49-51, 58-59. On the reception of the theories of Pico della Mirandola and Reuchlin by the next generations of Christian Hebraists and Kabbalists: *ibid.*, p. 135-138, 162, 233, 243.

⁵⁵ G. B. SARFATTI, "Hebrew Script in Western Visual Arts", *Italia: Studi e ricerche sulla storia, la cultura e la letteratura degli ebrei d'Italia*, XIII-XV (2001), p. 451-547, entries 1, 15, 72, 75, 107, 115, 150, 162, 175, 240, 242, 243, 256; G. B. SARFATTI, "Hebrew Script in Western Visual Arts: Addenda", *Italia: Studi e ricerche sulla storia, la cultura e la letteratura degli ebrei d'Italia*, XVI (2004), p. 135-156, entry 284.

⁵⁶ A list of Hebrew translations of the New Testament may be found in J. CARMIGNAC, *The Four Gospels Translated into Hebrew by William Greenfield in 1831*, Turnhout, 1982, p. VII-X; additions to this list are provided in E. SHUALI, *Traduire le Nouveau Testament en Hébreu: Un miroir des rapports judéo-chrétiens* (Ph.D. Dissertation), Strasbourg, 2015, p. 248-254: <http://www.theses.fr/2015STRAK021>

⁵⁷ In *Bešorat Matay. Evangelium Matthæi ex Hebraeo Fideliter Redditum*, Paris, 1555, the name *Yešu* is used, among other stylistic means, in order to make the text appear Jewish: E. SHUALI, "Les deux versions de l'évangile de Matthieu en hébreu publiées par Sebastian Münster (1537) et par Jean du Tillet et Jean Mercier (1555): Un réexamen des textes et de la question de leurs auteurs", in G. DAHAN, A. NOBLESSE-ROCHER (eds.), *Les hébraïsants chrétiens en France*

the second half of the sixteenth century and of the seventeenth century, for example, in paintings of the cross with its trilingual inscription or of St. Matthew writing his Gospel in Hebrew by painters such as El Greco, Diego Velázquez, Caravaggio, Peter Paul Rubens and Rembrandt.⁵⁸ Almost all other Hebrew texts produced by Christians that I surveyed also use the name *Yešua* ‘ for Jesus.⁵⁹ These include: Sebastian Münster’s polemical Hebrew dialogue *HaVikuaḥ* from 1529;⁶⁰ Johannes Clajus’ Hebrew translation the Luther’s *Small Catechism* from 1572;⁶¹ three Lutheran Hebrew lectionaries (two Evangelitaria and one Epistolarium) published in 1573, 1576 and 1586;⁶² Johann Heinrich Callenberg’s two missionaries treatises in Hebrew published by the *Institutum Judaicum* in Halle in 1736;⁶³ the Hebrew translation of the *Book of Common Prayer* published by the London Society for Promoting Christianity Amongst the Jews in 1836;⁶⁴ Joachim Heinrich Biesenthal’s Hebrew commentaries on the Gospel of Luke (1851), the Letter to the Romans (1853), the Letter to the Hebrews (1858), and the Acts of the Apostles (1867);⁶⁵ the missionary Hebrew journal *‘Edut LeIsrael* [Testimony to Israel] published from 1887 in the United States and later in Galicia; Emmanuel Yošpe’s Christian poems included in the collection *Širei HaYešu ‘a* published in Warsaw in 1892; the liturgy and sermons written by Joseph Rabinowitz, founder of

au XVI^e siècle, Geneva, 2018, p. 217-251 (246-247). In Georgio Mayr’s translation of the NT dated by Carmignac to 1622 (*The Four Gospels Translated into Hebrew by William Greenfield in 1831*, p. IX), the name *Yehošua* ‘ is used: Ms. Paris BNF Hébreu 131.

⁵⁸ SARFATTI, “Hebrew Script in Western Visual Arts”, entries 85, 102, 123, 124, 214, 224, 230, 248, 254; SARFATTI, “Hebrew Script in Western Visual Arts: Addenda”, entries 287, 296. *Yešu* is used in SARFATTI, “Hebrew Script in Western Visual Arts”, entries 59, 253.

⁵⁹ An early exception is Matthaëus Adriani, *Libellus Hora faciendi pro Domino scilicet filio virginis Mariae cuius mysterium in prologo legenti patebit*, Tübingen, 1513, in which a declinable form based on the name *Yešu* is used within the Hebrew text: *Yešuš* in the nominative, *Yešum* in the accusative.

⁶⁰ S. MÜNSTER, *HaVikuaḥ: Christiani hominis cum Iudæo pertinaciter prodigiosis suis opinionibus, et scripturae uiolenti interpretationibus addicto, Colloquium*, Basel, 1529.

⁶¹ M. LUTHER, *Catechesis Minor. Germanice, Latine, Graece et Ebraice*, ed. I. CLAJUS, Wittenberg, 1572.

⁶² F. PETRI, *Evangelia Anniversaria, quae Dominicis Diebus et in Sanctorum Festis Leguntur, Hebraice Conversa*, Wittenberg, 1573; J. CLAIUS, *Evangelia Anniversaria Dominicorum et Festorum Dierum, Germanice, Latine, Graece et Ebraice*, Leipzig, 1576; C. NEANDER, *Epistolae Anniversariae, quae Dominicis Diebus ac Sanctorum Festis Praecipuis in Ecclesia Praeleguntur EBRAEAE Iam Recens ex Graeco Textu ac Syra Paraphrasi Factae; Breuibusque Scholijs, sed tamen haud Poenitendis Illustratae*, Leipzig, 1586.

⁶³ J. H. CALLENBERG, *Jesus Messias Notescens Prophetarum et Matthaëi Consensu. Hebraice*, Halle, 1736; *Messias Picacularis. Hebraice*, Halle, 1736. The name *Yešua* ‘ is also used in Callenberg’s missionary tracts in Yiddish, e.g. *Yore De ‘a. Doctor Scientiae Christianae Judaeis Destinatus. In Germanicum Judaeorum Idioma Transferri Curavit et Publici Fecit iuris*, Halle, 1733.

⁶⁴ *The Book of Common Prayer, According to the Use of the United Church of England and Ireland. Translated into Hebrew*, London, 1836.

⁶⁵ *Sepher Bešora Tova ‘al pi HaMebhašer Luqas MiSepharim HaNiqra ‘im Berit Hadaša* [The Gospel According to the Evangelist Luke, from the Books Called the New Testament], Berlin, 1851; *Epistola Pauli Ad Romanos cum Rabbinico Commentario. Der Brief Pauli an die Römer mit rabbinischem Commentar*, Berlin, 1853; *Epistola Pauli Ad Hebraeos cum Rabbinico Commentario. Der Brief Pauli an die Hebräer mit rabbinischem Commentar*, Berlin, 1858; *Sepher Po ‘olei HaŠeliḥim ašer LeLuqas HaMebhašer*, Berlin 1867.

the *Children of Israel of the New Covenant* movement in Kishinev at the end of the nineteenth century.⁶⁶

Hebrew speakers affiliated with different Christian denominations in Israel also generally use the name *Yešua*´. Hence, this is the name used in the Hebrew text of the Catholic Mass from the 1950s to the present,⁶⁷ as well as in documents of Messianic Jews, such as the *Credo* or the Passover Haggadah.⁶⁸ The organization Jews for Jesus is named in Israel *Yehudim Lema´an Yešua*´.⁶⁹ In formal oral discourse, e.g. television interviews, Hebrew speaking Christians also tend to use the name *Yešua*´.⁷⁰

Three conceptions seem to underlie the reasons usually given by Christian Hebraists and Hebrew speaking Christians for using the name *Yešua*´ and not *Yešu*: 1. *Yešua*´ is the appropriate name for Jesus, because it is derived from the Hebrew root *YŠ*´ meaning “to save”. In this context, Matthew 1:21 is sometimes quoted: “and you shall call his name Jesus, *for* (γάρ) he will save his people from their sins.” (ESV) 2. Since *Yešua*´ is a well-known Hebrew name, common in the Hebrew Bible and in Jewish society, it is likely to be Jesus’ real name; for the same reason, it is also a means for emphasizing Jesus’ Jewishness. 3. The name *Yešu* is of a deprecatory nature. These conceptions may be illustrated by the following statements:

⁶⁶ J. RABINOWITZ, *Tefila We´iqarei´emuna, LiBhnei Israel Bnei Berit Hadaša* [Prayer and Articles of Faith for Sons of Israel Sons of the New Covenant], Kishinev, 1892; *Hagada LiBhnei Israel HaMa´aminim BaMašiaḥ Yešua´ HaNošri* [Haggadah for Sons of Israel who believe in the Messiah *Yešua*´ the Nazarene], in F. DELITZSCH, ed., *Documente der national-jüdischen christ-gläubigen Bewegung in Südrussland*, Erlangen, 1884, p. XVIII-XXII; *Devarim Niḥumim* [Comforting Words], Kishinev, 1897. On Rabinowitz: K. KJÆR-HANSEN, *Joseph Rabinowitz and the Messianic Movement: The Herzl of Jewish Christianity*, trans. D. STONER, Edinburgh-Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1995.

⁶⁷ On the history of the Mass in Hebrew: P. E. LAPIDE, *Hebrew in the Church: The Foundations of Jewish-Christian Dialogue*, trans. E. F. RHODES, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1984, p. 115-132. I greatly thank Yohanan Elihai for providing me with a copy of the Mass from 1964. The current text of the Mass may be read and heard on the website of Saint James Vicariate For Hebrew Speaking Catholics in Israel: http://catholic.co.il/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1126:listen-to-the-mass-in-hebrew&catid=23&lang=en&Itemid=162 (accessed on 28 Feb 2018).

⁶⁸ Examples may be found in G. NEREL, “From American Mission to Israeli Messianic Assembly: Theology and Deed in Jerusalem’s Street of the Prophets” (Hebrew), *Cathedra* 154 (2014), p. 107-136 (124, 126, 128, 130).

⁶⁹ The organization’s Hebrew website is: <http://yeshua4u.co.il/> (accessed on 28 Feb 2018).

⁷⁰ Interview with David Neuhaus, Patriarchal Vicar for Hebrew speaking Catholics, in *Meqablim Šabbat´im Dov Elboim*, Israel Broadcasting Authority – Channel 1, aired on 29 April 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NIH38ONtCTo>; *Matti Caspi: Confession* (documentary), written and directed by Dalia Mevorach and Dani Dothan, Israel Broadcasting Authority – Channel 1, 2015, 1:05:40, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lp1irRifDEM>; *Yehudim Mešihyim, Mi Hem?* [Messianic Jews, Who Are They?] Interview with Gershon Nerel, posted by Avner Valer, 8 July 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y9lewtR2xD4> (I accessed the three videos on 28 Feb 2018).

Sebastian Münster, *Torat HaMašiah, Euangelium Secundum Matthaeum in Lingua Hebraica*, Basel, 1537:

The name ישוע is frequent in the Holy Books, and means “salvation”. Sometimes it has the insertion הו, that is, יהושוע *Iehosua*, and therefore means “the salvation of the Lord”. Among the Evangelists, it is written in the absolute *Iesua*, for he is salvation itself, in the same way that he is also called wisdom and justice themselves. For he saves us from our sins, justifies us and bestows wisdom upon the little ones.⁷¹

Giovanni Battista Iona, *'Arba 'a 'Abhnei HaGilyonim MeHaTora HaHadaša, Quator Evangelia Novi Testamenti*, Rome, 1668, criticizing the use of the name *Yešū* in an older Hebrew translation of the Gospel of Matthew (n. 52):

ועוד בכתוב שם המשיח בלשון עברית כתוב ישו ולא כשמו יהושוע או ישוע משורש ישע שהושיע העולם וכל מין האנושי מחטא אדם הראשון: והיהודים לרוע לבם בלשון עברית קורין אותו 'ישו' לומר שראש תיבות ימח שמו וזכרו⁷²

And among the things written there, the name of the Messiah in Hebrew is written *Yešū* and not as was his name: *Yehošua* ' or *Yešua* ' from the root *YŠ* ', for he saved the world and all of mankind from the sin of the first man. And the Jews in their wickedness call him in Hebrew *Yešū*, indicating the acronym of “May his name and memory be erased.”

Stephen Katz, Chief of Station at the Washington D.C. branch of Jews for Jesus, describes thus the “evangelistic or pre-evangelistic messages” of a campaign carried out in Israel in 2008, in which the main slogan was: *Yešū* = *Yešua* ' = *Yešū* 'ah (salvation):

- Jesus' real name is Yeshua (not Yeshu).
- He is not a foreigner, but one of us.
- His name means salvation.
- He can answer your deepest concern: the need for security.⁷³

An interview with David Neuhaus, Patriarchal Vicar for Hebrew speaking Catholics, broadcasted on Israeli television in 2011:

⁷¹ “*Nomen ישוע frequens est in libris sacris, sonatque salutem et nonnunquam habet epenthesisin הו ut יהושוע Iehosua et tunc sonat salutem domini. Apud euangelistas scribitur absolute Iesua, quod ipse sit salus ipsa, sicut et sapientia atque iusticia ipsa uocatur. Saluat enim nos a peccatis nostris, iustificat nos et sapientiam praestat paruulis.*” p. 48.

⁷² Prooemium, [p. 4-5].

⁷³ S. KATZ, “The Applied Use of Survey Results in Evangelizing Jewish Israelis”, *Mishkan: A Forum on the Gospel and the Jewish People* 59 (2009), p. 17-22 (19).

דב אלבוים: אתה אומר ישוע ולא ישו, כי ישו זה לא שם שנהוג... זה לא כל כך... קונוטציה לא טובה?
דוד נויאהוז: ישוע הוא איש יהודי, ולכן שמו יהודי: יהושע, ישוע. ישו בא מדורות של פולמוס, אז זה שם שאנחנו...⁷⁴

Dov Elboim (interviewer): You say *Yešua* and not *Yešu*, because *Yešu* is not a name that is normally... it's not so... the connotation is not good?

David Neuhaus: *Yešua* is a Jewish man, and therefore his name is Jewish: *Yehošua*, *Yešua*. *Yešu* comes from generations of dispute, so it's a name that we...

Jesus' name in Modern Israeli Hebrew

In continuance of Jewish usage at earlier periods, in Modern Israeli Hebrew from the first decades of the twentieth century to the present, Jesus is most commonly named *Yešu*. This name is used in most of the literature, both scholarly and *belles-lettres*, mentioning Jesus: e.g. Josef Klausner, *Yešu HaNošri: Zemano, Ḥayav, VeTorato (Jesus of Nazareth: His Time, Life, and Teaching*, Jerusalem, 1922); Aharon Avraham Kabak, *BaMiš'ol HaŠar (On the Narrow Path*, Tel Aviv, 1937); Haim H. Cohen, *Mišpato UMoto Šel Yešu HaNošri (The Trial and Death of Jesus*, Tel Aviv, 1968); Amos Kenan, *Ḥabherim Mesaprim 'Al Yešu (Friends Talk About Jesus)* in *Maḥazot (Plays*, Tel Aviv, 1978); the poetry of Avot Yeshurun, for example, the poem entitled “*Yešu*” in *'Ein Li 'Akhšav (I Don't Have Now*, [Tel Aviv], 1992);⁷⁵ Amos Oz, *HaBešora 'Al-Pi Yehuda (The Gospel According to Judas*, Israel, 2014).

The name *Yešu* is commonly used at university, as may attest the names of a few courses taught at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem in recent years:⁷⁶ הברית החדשה א': ישו ותלמידיו בספרי הבשורה (New Testament 1: Jesus and His Disciples in the Gospels; taught in the academic years 2001/2-2004/5); אור העולם: דמותו של ישו בקולנוע (The Light of the World: The Figure of Jesus in Cinema; 2002/3, 2004/5, 2010/11, 2012/13. 2014/15);⁷⁷ בתי כנסת עתיקים – מישו עד בית אלפא (Ancient

⁷⁴ Interview with David Neuhaus, in *Meqablim Šabbat 'im Dov Elboim*, 29 April 2011, 2:26.

⁷⁵ A. YESHURUN, *Collected Poems*, Vol. IV, Tel Aviv, 2001, p. 241; other examples may be found on p. 87, 149, 240, 245. On Jesus in the poetry of Avot Yeshurun: N. STAHL, *Other and Brother: Jesus in the 20th-Century Jewish Literary Landscape*, Oxford, 2013, p. 147-162.

⁷⁶ Cited from the Hebrew University's Course Catalogue for the academic years 1999/2000-2017/18: <http://shnaton.huji.ac.il/index.php> (on 11 March 2018).

⁷⁷ During the academic year 2007/8, the course was named: אור העולם: דמותו של ישוע בקולנוע.

Synagogues – From Jesus to Beit Alpha; 2008/9); בנצרות ובאסלאם (The Image of Jesus in Judaism, Christianity and Islam; 2014/15).

Yešu is the name normally used in Israeli press, as may be illustrated by a few headlines: תקון קבר־ סרט ("The Reparation of Jesus' Tomb – At Whose Cost?" *Davar*, 20/5/1934, p. 1); על יוסרט בישראל ("A Film on Jesus Will Be Shot in Israel", *Herut*, 11/6/1950, p. 1.); ישו יוחזר תמורת שוקולד ("Jesus Will be Returned in Exchange for Chocolate", *Ma'ariv*, 31/12/1974, p. 17); לנגב חומוס עם ישו ("Eating Humus with Jesus", article by Maya Levin in *Ha'aretz*, 23/11/2010).⁷⁸

In oral discourse, Jesus is also most usually called *Yešu*. Hence, in a survey ordered by Jews for Jesus and conducted in "the Greater Tel-Aviv metropolitan area" in 2007, to the question: "To your knowledge, what is the name for the Christian Messiah?" 72% of the 981 respondents replied: *Yešu*, whereas only 8% replied *Yešua*.⁷⁹

The name *Yešua* has, however, also been used in certain cases by non-Christian writers of Modern Hebrew. In a few literary texts namely from the first half of the twentieth century, the name *Yešua* has been used as one of many means for emphasizing Jesus' Jewish identity. These include Nathan Bistrizky's play *Yešua MiNašeret: Hagada Dramaṭit (Jesus of Nazareth: A Dramatic Tale*, Tel Aviv, 1951 [written in 1921]),⁸⁰ and Zalman Shneour's poem *Dibhrei Don Henriquez (The Words of Don Henriquez*, Berlin, 1922).⁸¹ A few examples from these works may illustrate the use of this name within the framework of this Jewish reclamation of Jesus.

Hence, in Bistrizky's *Yešua MiNašeret*, the character *Yešua* wears a Tallit and recites the Jewish food blessings:⁸²

ישוע בא בצעד כושל, טליתו קרועה וכולו מדוכדך...

Yešua comes staggering. His Tallit is torn and he is utterly gloomy.

ישוע: (...) ברוך אתה ה' אלוהינו מלך העולם בורא פרי הגפן. שותה

⁷⁸ <http://www.haaretz.co.il/gallery/1.1231357> (accessed on 12 March 2018).

⁷⁹ "The remaining 20% of subjects showed ignorance, indifference, or antipathy for the subject". S. KATZ, "A Survey of Israeli Knowledge and Attitudes toward Jesus", *Mishkan: A Forum on the Gospel and the Jewish People* 59 (2009), p. 6-16.

⁸⁰ STAHL, *Other and Brother*, p. 22-25.

⁸¹ M. HOFFMAN, *From Rebel to Rabbi: Reclaiming Jesus and the Making of Modern Jewish Culture*, Stanford, 2007, p. 181-188; STAHL, *Other and Brother*, p. 34-35.

⁸² N. BISTRITZKY, *Yešua MiNašeret: Hagada Dramaṭit*, Tel Aviv, [1951], p. 18, 56.

המסובים: אמן.

(...)

בוצע הפת

ישוע:

ברוך אתה ה' אלוהינו מלך העולם המוציא לחם מן הארץ.

המסובים: אמן.

Yešua': (...) Blessed are you, Adonai our God, king of the universe, who creates the fruit of the vine. Drinks

The tablemates: Amen.

(...)

Yešua': Breaks the bread

Blessed are you, Adonai our God, king of the universe, who brings forth bread from the earth.

The tablemates: Amen.

In Shneour's *Dibhrei Don Henriquez*, Jesus' Jewish identity is stated emphatically:⁸³

בן־אדם מנצרת,

ישוע, אָח לי קדום!

Son of man from Nazareth,

Yešua ', my ancient bother!

אין נענה לשם שמים

מלבד ישוע היהודי,

שנצלב בגלגלתא.

And no one is tortured in Heavens' name

Except for *Yešua* ' the Jew,

who was crucified at Calvary.

In the last two decades, the name *Yešua* ' has been used in the works of a number of Israeli academics written in Hebrew: e. g. Israel Jacob Yuval, *"Two Nations in Your Womb" Perceptions of Jews and Christians* (Tel Aviv, 2000); Joshua Efron, *The Origins of Christianity and Apocalypticism* (Tel Aviv, 2004), and *Formation of the Primary Christian Church* (Tel Aviv, 2006); Serge Ruzer, Yair Zakovitch, *In the Beginning Was the Word. Eight Conversations on the Fourth Gospel* (Jerusalem, 2014), and *God's Word is Powerful. Eight Conversations on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Jerusalem, 2016); Jonathan Cahana, ed. and trans., *Gnostica: An Anthology of*

⁸³ Z. SHNEOUR, *Širim: TRS" A-TS" H* [Poems: 1901-1945], Tel Aviv, 1951, p. 394.

Gnostic Writings in Hebrew Translation (Tel Aviv, 2017). The primary motivation for choosing the name *Yešua* ' and not the common *Yešu* seems to me to be the wish of these academics to avoid the impression of a Jewish bias towards Jesus. They therefore adopt in their writings the name used in Hebrew by Christians.⁸⁴

Conclusion

Throughout the ages, Jesus' name in Hebrew has been in the middle of the mutual gazes Jews and Christians directed at each other. The name *Yešu*, constantly the most common name used in Hebrew for Jesus, has been viewed as reflecting the vileness and foreignness attributed to Jesus by Jews, but also thought to be a unique piece of information on the historical Jesus preserved only in Jewish tradition. Jesus' other name in Hebrew – *Yešua* ' – has been perceived as linked to the distinctively Christian conception of Jesus as savior, but also as a mark of Jesus' Jewishness. The existence of both of these names and the real or at least hypothetical possibility of choosing between them have constantly reminded readers, speakers and writers of Hebrew of these contrasting perceptions of Jesus and, more generally, of the intricately complex nature of the relations between Judaism and Christianity, which may be felt upon the mere mention of Jesus in Hebrew.

⁸⁴ This may be compared to the use of the term כריסטוס in the writings of some of these authors (J. Efron, J. Cahana) and others.