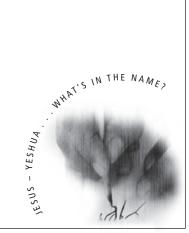# What's in Jesus' Name According to Matthew?

by **Kai Kjær-Hansen**

In an earlier essay in *Mishkan*, I dealt with the name forms Yehoshua, Yeshua, and Yeshu for Jesus of Nazareth.[1] I argued then that Jesus of Nazareth bore the Hebrew name Yeshua, not the long form Yehoshua/Joshua, and certainly not Yeshu. As to the name form Yeshu, I briefly presented my own thesis, namely that the disciples of Jesus, with others from Galilee, may have had trouble with the pronunciation of the guttural *ayin* at the end of a word. Perhaps they pronounced Yeshua like Yeshu. But when the pronunciation of a name is established *in writing*, something happens to that name, a matter which has not always received due attention. It is my thesis that at first some Jewish leaders sneered at the Galilean pronunciation Yeshu. When later they *wrote* Yeshu without the *ayin*, it was a deliberate attempt on their part to distance themselves from the soteriological connotations of the name Yeshua; Yeshu was just a man from Galilee. Whether or not my thesis holds good, the shift from Yeshua to Yeshu in writing has not, in my opinion, been sufficiently accounted for in the various attempts to solve this problem.

Speculation in Names

Through the ages the name of Jesus, in Hebrew, Greek, Latin, and other languages, has been the subject of quite a lot of interest – and speculation. The first literary example of this is found in the *Epistle of Barnabas* (IX,7–9) from about AD 100. Christians have made numerous attempts to combine the name of Jesus and the Tetragrammaton of YHWH – or its first two Hebrew letters, *yod* and *he*. Mystical interpretation of numbers has also been used. All this has been done with pious intentions, but is nonetheless speculation.

Similarly, the name form Yeshu has been interpreted by Jews with the application of Jewish interpretative principles such as *gematria* and *no-*

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1 Kai Kjær-Hansen, "Yehoshua, Yeshua, Jesus and Yeshu – An Introduction to the Names," *Mishkan* 17/18 (1993): 23–38. A first draft of this article is available as a speech manuscript ("An Introduction to the Names Yehoshua/Joshua, Yeshua, Jesus and Yeshu," Jews for Jesus, http://jewsforjesus.org/answers/jesus/names [accessed May 14, 2009].

tarikon. All of this is done in an (understandable) dissociation from Christianity and its Savior because of all the evil that has been perpetrated against the Jewish people in the name of Jesus, but it is nevertheless also speculation. Based on the *notarikon* method, Yeshu (ישו) has, e.g., been construed as *yimach sh'mo v'zichro*, i.e. "May his name and his memory be blotted out."

But there are also a few examples where Yeshu, on the basis of the same principles, is interpreted positively about Jesus of Nazareth by Jews who have been converted to the Christian faith; indeed, there are amulets with the names Yehoshua, Yeshua, *and* Yeshu written in Hebrew letters on the very same amulet – interesting matters which I cannot go into here.[2]

The reason why I mention this is that Stephen Katz, in his article "The Applied Use of Survey Results in Evangelizing Jewish Israelis" in this issue of *Mishkan*, says the following (in note 1): "Another direction that our staff considered was to make a direct attempt to reverse the curse nature of the name Yeshu by supplying the first letter of the acronym with a different word that transforms the entire phrase into a new, honorable meaning: *yishtabach sh'mo v'zichro* ('May his name and memory be praised')."

I am pleased that they did not give in to this "temptation." If that had happened, they could, with some right, be accused of name speculation. Nothing could be easier than, through speculation and *notarikon*, to give the name Yeshu an "honorable meaning." All you need to do is take your Hebrew dictionary and find a *hitpa'el* form of a good and positive verb. The possibilities are legion. But if the intention is to give a genuine impression of who Jesus of Nazareth was, and is, and how the gospel writers present him – then the loss is greater than the gain.

Matthew the Evangelist certainly does not use such speculative methods, even though the name of Jesus is important for him. In the following, I shall give a short outline of how he looks upon the name and person of Jesus. This outline is accompanied by some comments that may be relevant for Jewish evangelism today.

Matthew, "Iesous," and "Yeshua"

Matthew has no hidden agenda. He writes after the death and resurrection of Jesus – in the light of these events, without which it is impossible to understand the work of Jesus.

In the introduction to his gospel, he puts his cards on the table. He is about to present the story of Jesus Christ. If he had written his gospel in Hebrew, he would have written *Yeshua haMashiach*. The question of which language the Gospel of Matthew was originally written in has not yet been solved. I can only argue on the basis of the Greek text, and I note

2 I hope in a later article to be able to give examples of such speculations in connection with the interpretation of the name forms Yeshu and Yeshua in Jewish and Christian sources; some of this material appears in a commented form in my dissertation (in Danish): Kai Kjær-Hansen, *Studier i navnet Jesus [Studies in the Name of Jesus]* (Aarhus: Menighedsfakultetet, 1992).

that Matthew renders the name of his principal character with the common transcription *Iesous* and not Yeshua.

I also note that many people involved in Jewish evangelism today use the form Yeshua, even when they speak English.[3] Actually, I do not think Matthew really minds that, I just note that Matthew does not use the Hebraic transcription, although he had this alternative (cf. his use of Hebrew or Aramaic words and terms elsewhere in the gospel). I think he takes it for granted that when he writes *Iesous Xristos*, he will be understood by the ordinary reader – Jewish as well as Gentile. The main character is the Jew Jesus, who is the Messiah – a Jewish concept. In other words, it is possible for Matthew to describe the Jewishness of Jesus although he uses the Greek name form *Iesous Xristos*. And, one might add, using the Jewish name form Yeshua is no guarantee for a presentation of Jesus' genuine Jewishness and unique character. Things are not as easy as that![4]

The Genealogy and Modern Readers

In the introduction to his gospel, Matthew, after having listed Jesus' ancestors, goes on to write about Jesus Christ, the son of David and the son of Abraham. Jesus is related to the big ones: to the greatest king in Israel's history, King David. He who has ears, let him hear, says Matthew: God gave promises to David that were fulfilled in Jesus. And Jesus is related to Abraham, the first "Jew." He who has ears, let him hear that this also means good news for Gentiles. God's promise to Abraham implies good news for Gentiles for, as it was said to Abraham, "Through you I will bless all the nations" (Gen 12:3).

The very first verse gives clear signals to the readers about the main character of the gospel: Christ, son of David, son of Abraham. And again: no hidden agenda. Readers could roll up the scroll saying: This is not for me. And I am afraid that at least many modern non-Jewish readers have skipped chapter one because of the many strange Jewish names in the genealogy. This is a pity, for then they miss a revealed code which I think is the very key to the Gospel of Matthew, namely the 21st verse. I will return to this verse.

Modern readers find this chapter extremely boring. When the latest authorized Danish Bible translation was completed in 1992, some churches decided to sponsor free copies of the New Testament for evangelizing purposes. And since I had been part of the team of translators, I was asked, by people who were familiar with the Bible, "Why couldn't you have placed Matthew's gospel in a less conspicuous place in the New Testament? When people open it and on the first page see this long list of names which mean

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3 Although it has long been known that Jesus' name in Hebrew is Yeshua, as also evidenced in mission literature in the nineteenth century and the first part of the twentieth century, it is not until the late 1960s or the early 1970s, I think, that the form Yeshua becomes generally used and accepted in writings in English, for example. This matter might deserve a critical investigation together with a weighing of the pros and cons of this usage.

4 See my comments on this in *Mishkan* 17/18 (1993): 35–37.

nothing to them, they are bound to say: This is not for me!"

Even leaders involved in Jewish evangelism will have to admit, I presume, that several of these names from Jewish history are just names. And this is probably also the case with many of the Jewish people they are trying to reach with the gospel.

But if we assume that Matthew had a predominantly Jewish audience in mind, and that most of the first readers had a thorough knowledge of the personalities of Old Testament history, their situation was a different one. Behind each name they would be able to make out the silhouette of a person with a history – unlike many of us today.

For the first readers, the genealogy would have been shocking reading that must have made them rub their eyes, not least when they read the names of the four women – and Mary.

The Four Women and Mary in the Genealogy

The genealogy mentions five women: four from the Hebrew Scriptures and then the mother of Jesus, Mary – or Miriam as she was probably called in Hebrew.

Tamar: It was Tamar who disguised herself as a prostitute and became pregnant by her father-in-law. A horrible story (cf. Gen 38). Is it not odd that Tamar should be mentioned in the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah?

Rahab: The prostitute in Jericho who helped the Israelite spies prior to the downfall of that city (cf. Josh 2). Is it not odd that she should be mentioned in the genealogy of Jesus?

Ruth: The Moabite woman who belonged to Israel's archenemies, i.e. a Gentile woman (cf. the Book of Ruth). Even if she eventually became a part of Israel's people, is it not odd that she has her place in the genealogy of the Jew Jesus?

Uriah's wife: Of course Matthew knows her name, Bathsheba. The fact that she is referred to as Uriah's wife leads us to think of David, his misdeed and sin (cf. 2 Sam 11–12; Ps 51). Is it not odd that this event is also included in the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah?

The four women of the genealogy – and we could include many of the men – are used by Matthew to show that God carries out his plan in a world of sin and sinners. And if we include Mary, Jesus' mother, we can see that the common denominator for them is something unusual. The unexpected, the atypical is part of God's salvation history. It is also part of Jesus' history.

Jesus' mother was going to have a son by the Holy Spirit.

The Name of Jesus – Matthew 1:21

Matthew does not tell us about the birth itself. He says that the miraculous conception took place, and he mentions Joseph's reaction to this and the intervention of the angel of the Lord. The words from the angel of the Lord to Joseph are important. It is said of Mary that "she will have a son,

and you will name him Jesus – because he will save his people from their sins" (Matt 1:21).

I will have to restrict myself to a few brief remarks about Matthew's revealed "code" – for this is what I think verse 21 is.

1. The name of Jesus is divinely sanctioned. The statement comes from the angel of the Lord. Naturally, this statement applies only to Mary's child, not to other children who were called Yeshua.

2. If we translate backwards, from Greek to Hebrew, we get a Hebrew wordplay: *Yeshua . . . yoshia*, i.e. Jesus will save. If Matthew wrote his gospel in Greek, it is worth noting that he obviously takes for granted that his readers will understand the correspondence between the name of Jesus and the verb *to save*. In other words, Matthew – or the angel of the Lord! – is not as explicit in the interpretation of the name Jesus as when the name Immanuel is mentioned, and translated, in verse 23.

3. If the angel of the Lord had been a "dictionary angel," I suppose he would have said – as Philo, the Alexandrine philosopher, did – that Jesus means "the salvation of the Lord" or something like "the one by whom the Lord saves." He does not. But there is an important addition which transcends an etymological explanation of the name of Jesus. This addition is in the words "from their sins."

> **He, Mary's child, might be expected to be the one who would save his people from the Romans. But he is not. He is to save his people "from their sins."**

He, Mary's child, might be expected to be the one who would save his people from the Romans. But he is not. He is to save his people "from their sins." This addition makes explicit the nature of the salvation which the name of Jesus implies. It is not something which just flows smoothly from Matthew's pen. This has been carefully contemplated. Revealed "codes" always are.

In the words of the Swedish New Testament scholar Birger Gerhardsson:

> This is not an unaffected, natural phrase that flowed of its own accord from the pen of the evangelist. It is a carefully formed pronouncement showing how he apprehends the *kind* of salvation indicated by the name of Jesus.[5]

When it comes to giving a precise description of the true nature of Jesus' work, everything else is of secondary importance. That something is of secondary importance does not mean that it is irrelevant. I am not blind to the implication of Matthew's division of the genealogy into three groups, each with 14 persons. This may have symbolic importance since 14, in Hebrew,

5 Birger Gerhardsson, *The Mighty Acts of Jesus according to Matthew* (Lund: LiberLäromedel/ Gleerup, 1979), 77.

is the numerical value for DaViD, and some believe that Matthew hereby wants to indicate that Jesus, in a deeper sense, is David's son. I don't know! But surely it is not a revealed code! In verse 21, however, we find the decisive identification of the person and work of Jesus. Whether Matthew refers to Jesus as the Son of David, the Son of Abraham, the Son of Man, the Servant, Christ, Immanuel, etc., behind it is the reality that Mary's son is God's Son – a designation which is not explicitly mentioned in chapter one but is implied. And this Son of God – Jesus is his name – is the one who saves from sin.

"Immanuel" and "Jesus" – Matthew 1:23

The next short section in Matthew's gospel (1:22–25) is about Immanuel. The name Immanuel comes from Isaiah 7:14, and is part of the first of Matthew's fulfillment quotations. This is the only place in the whole New Testament where the name Immanuel occurs. The name Jesus appears about 150 times in Matthew's gospel alone.[6] As mentioned above, the name Immanuel is accompanied by an explicit translation, which is not the case with the name Jesus. It is obvious that Matthew considered the meaning of the name Immanuel important. The Immanuel prophecy substantiates the significance of the name Jesus as expressed in verse 21. For Matthew, there is no competition between these names. Formally, the name Jesus is of superior importance compared to the name Immanuel, for it is the naming scene which causes Matthew to quote Isaiah 7:14, the verse with Immanuel.

In other words, if it was shocking for the first readers to read, in the genealogy of Jesus, about Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Uriah's wife/David's sin, and if it was shocking to read that Mary was made pregnant by the Holy Spirit, it would have been no less shocking to read that Jesus was to save his people from their sins.

Saving from sin and forgiving sin is the prerogative of Israel's God, and is normally connected with the temple in Jerusalem.

Jesus and the Process of Forgiveness of Sin

In the scholarly debate, E. P. Sanders and N. T. Wright, among others, have argued that forgiveness of sin, in the time of Jesus, was seen as a *process* of confession, repentance, and restitution for the damage caused. These matters could be dealt with anywhere, at the place where the individual was living. But the conclusion of the process of forgiveness took place in Jerusalem, in the temple, where sacrifices were offered in accordance with the requirements of the law for the sin committed.

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6 If we assume that Matthew knew Mark's gospel, it is remarkable that in pericopes where there is no "Jesus" in Mark, Matthew has often inserted the name, and in pericopes where Mark does have "Jesus," Matthew usually retains it. Perhaps we should not attach too much importance to this, but it is nevertheless worth noting.

On the point of forgiveness of sin, Jesus shocked his contemporaries, just as John the Baptist had done, by *not* instructing them to bring sacrifices to the temple – the time-honored place for the closure of the process of forgiveness. Jesus forgives on the spot. In Sander's words, "Jesus did not call sinners to repent as normally understood, which involved restitution and/or sacrifice, but rather to accept his message, which promised them the kingdom. This would have been offensive to normal piety."[7]

Or as Wright says: "Jesus was replacing adherence or allegiance to Temple and Torah with allegiance to himself. Restoration and purity were to be had, not through the usual channels, but through Jesus."[8]

That Jesus forgives sins on the spot is seen clearly in the story of the paralyzed man in Capernaum: ". . . Your sins are forgiven" (Matt 9:2). There is a beautiful match between these words and what is implied in the name of Jesus, as expressed in Matthew 1:21: he, Jesus, came to save his people from their sins, and the words in Matthew 9 must naturally be interpreted in the light of this.
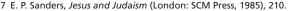
Jesus in a Category of His Own

This places Jesus in a category of his own – but not through number mysticism or *notarikon* or *gematria* or similar speculations. Jesus is of divine origin, and he has a divine mission. He is, as Peter says about him in the middle of the gospel, "Christ, the Son of the living God" (Matt 16:16). Peter's confession is formally correct, but the meaning of it did not dawn upon him until after the death and resurrection of Jesus.

This Jesus, who saves from sin, is for Matthew greater than all those he is compared to. It is true that he is David's descendent, but he is also David's Lord (22:41–46). He is greater than Jonah (12:41), greater than Solomon's temple (12:6), greater than John the Baptist (3:11) who is even said to be much more than a prophet (11:9). This Jesus, who saves from sin, is the Son of Man who is Lord of the Sabbath (12:8).

As the Son of God of divine origin, he has been endowed with a unique divine authority. In the Sermon on the Mount, he speaks as one who is more than and greater than Moses. Jesus' words have the same weight as God's words. To confess him corresponds to confessing God. To deny him corresponds to denying God.

Jesus speaks and acts in his own name, so to speak. He has authority from his heavenly Father. Everything has been given to him by his heavenly Father: "My Father has given me all things. No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him" (Matt 11:27). Jesus has all authority in heaven and on earth (Matt 28:18). He is the Son of God, who through his suffering and death gave his life to redeem many people (Matt 20:28). He, Jesus, who saves from sin, is God's obedient Son who in every respect

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7 E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (London: SCM Press, 1985), 210.
8 N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (London: SPCK, 1996), 274. Cf. also pp. 406–12.

does the will of God – even when he is "handed over" by God to suffering and death.

That Matthew, also at the end of Jesus' life, sees him as the one who saves from sin emerges clearly from the words said in connection with the Lord's Supper in Matthew 26:28: "This is my blood, which seals God's covenant, my blood poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins." Among the synoptics, only Matthew includes the words "for the forgiveness of sins" when he writes about the Lord's Supper.

Those who remember the "code" from chapter 1 verse 21 are not surprised. Nor is it in this context surprising that the "angel of the Lord" at the open tomb has the name of Jesus on his lips.

Jesus and the Angel of the Lord at the Open Tomb

In the naming scene in Matthew 1:20–21, it is the "angel of the Lord" who commands Joseph to give Mary's child the name Jesus. The angel of the Lord reappears in the account of Jesus' resurrection (Matt 28:1–7), where he says to the women, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified" (28:5). Just as the name of Jesus was divinely sanctioned *before* his birth, so it is *after* his death and resurrection. Of course the angel of the Lord has not forgotten what he said to Joseph about naming Jesus thirty years earlier! By means of relatively few touches, Matthew manages, at the end of his gospel, to establish a connection to the name Jesus in chapter 1.

When the angel of the Lord can use the name Jesus for the resurrected one, Matthew, the writer, can also do so (Matt 28:9–10). It is therefore a narrowing down of the vocabulary in Matthew to claim that the name Jesus is *only* used about the earthly Jesus of Nazareth. Thus, the name Jesus on the lips of the angel of the Lord at the open tomb is used in the service of Christology. It is indeed the crucified Jesus who saves from sin. Or rather, it is the crucified *and risen* Jesus who does it. The words are said in the context of the resurrection of Jesus, for the "crucified one" is no longer in the tomb. A dead Jesus, whom God had not raised from the dead, would cancel the meaning of his name and work, as expressed in Matthew 1:21.

> **It is indeed the crucified Jesus who saves from sin. Or rather, it is the crucified *and risen* Jesus who does it.**

I do not deny that the name Jesus is a personal name in Matthew's gospel, but my argument is that it has some clearly Christological overtones.

Again, in Birger Gerhardsson's words, "The central figure of the Gospel bears the name of Jesus. It is surely inescapable that when the Gospel was finally edited this name had long since gained considerable Christological overtones."[9]

9 Gerhardsson, 82.

Yeshua . . . Yoshia

It is generally accepted that there is a Hebrew word-play – *Yeshua . . . yoshia* (i.e., "Jesus will save") – behind the Greek text of Matthew 1:21. Most translations of this verse into Hebrew – whether these translations lie hidden in a library or have been published – have preserved this word-play, even if there are exceptions.[10]

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It is interesting that Ibn Schaprut, in the oldest known Hebrew translation made by a Jew (from the fourteenth century) of a whole New Testament book, namely Matthew's gospel, used the name Yeshua in Matthew 1:21, and also retained the word-play *Yeshua . . . yoshia*. Ibn Schaprut also uses Yeshua in 1:25, but in all other places it is rendered Yeshu.

With many other examples from Jewish history, this shows that even if Jews generally speaking preferred the name form Yeshu for Jesus of Nazareth, the awareness lived on that the *original* name of the Christians' Savior was not Yeshu, but Yeshua.

WHAT'S IN JESUS' NAME ACCORDING TO MATTHEW?

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10 This question also needs further examination, as does the question of how the Hebrew translating tradition deals with other persons in the New Testament who also bear the name Jesus.