

“In the same way then, there has also come to be at the present time a remnant according to God’s gracious choice” (Romans 11:5)

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YESHUA – Making a Good Name Great Again

**The name of Yeshua (Jesus) means “salvation”
But that is not how His name is known in Israel**

by Galen Peterson

In Jerusalem there is a place called Safra Square where the original building of the British and Foreign Bible Society was built in 1926. A plaque commemorates the event. In October a municipal security guard attempted to blot out the name of Jesus on the plaque by covering it with Wite-Out correction fluid. But he was caught by an Israeli tour guide who reported it to the police, and in the end, the guard was fired. That demonstrates a responsible attitude of the authorities. But it also illustrates an underlying obsession that some Israelis have with eliminating the name of Yeshua or Jesus.

On the Jordan River, just south of the Sea of Galilee, is the Yardenit baptismal site that is popular among visitors to Israel. At the entrance is a wall with tiles quoting the gospel of Mark about the baptism of Yeshua in forty languages, including Hebrew. Unfortunately the Hebrew tiles with the name of Yeshua have been defaced more than once.



First, the tiles with his name had to be replaced because they were damaged, which is still evident by the slightly different color of the background. Later, one of the replacement tiles was defaced again (above). The vandal attempted to rub out the *ayin*, which is the last Hebrew letter of **ישוע** (Yeshua, read right to left).

At first glance, that just might seem to be common vandalism. But in reality, it reflects a far deeper issue in Israel regarding the name of Yeshua. Removing that last letter turns *Yeshua* into **ישו** (*Yeshu*), and that changes the meaning of His name from

“salvation” to something very different. To understand the significance of what *Yeshu* means, we have to recount the story that brought it about.

When the early believing community began, it was made up predominately by Messianic Jews in Judea. Over time, as the Good News spread to other lands, the majority of the community became comprised of Gentiles. But the number of Jews who believed in Yeshua also continued to grow. Acts 21:20 tells us that many thousands of Jews believed in Yeshua and lived culturally Jewish lives. So by the second century, it was very apparent that Messianic Judaism was not going away, and that was perceived as a threat to rabbinic Judaism that was reinventing itself after the destruction of the temple in 70 A.D.

The first reference to the name *Yeshu* is found in a second century rabbinic work called the *Tosefta* in which the name refers to a teacher of a heretic. This

person is not the Yeshua of the Bible. But it established a negative association with the name *Yeshu*.

In the Talmud, there are also references to people named *Yeshu*. The Talmud is comprised of two portions. One is the *Mishnah*, which is the oral tradition passed down from one generation to the next during the second temple period. It focuses on how the priests conducted worship during that time, like a manual for temple service, as well as other social and administrative matters. The second part is the *Gemara*, which contains commentaries on the *Mishnah* by rabbis during the third to fifth centuries A.D. So the *Gemara* reflects rabbinic thought that is dramatically different than the Judaism of the second temple period, and many of the opinions go far beyond anything found in the Torah.

It is in the *Gemara* that we read about a *Yeshu* who was a sorcerer and was hanged on the eve of Passover. But this wasn't a reference to the biblical Yeshua, because this one was hanged and had five disciples named Matthai, Nakai, Nezer, Buni and Todah. There are also references in the *Gemara* to a man named *Yeshu* who worshiped idols, as well as to the spirit of a foreign enemy. There is even a *Yeshu* who is criticized for burning his food in public. So in spite of not being directly linked to the Yeshua of the Bible, what links them together is the negative connotation associated with the name *Yeshu* because of their bad behavior.

It is not until the Middle Ages that a new understanding came about in a rabbinic work called the *Toledot Yeshu*, or the "Generations of Yeshu." This work tells the story of a man born from adultery, and was a disciple of John the Baptist before becoming a master

over his own disciples. He misleads people, steals the ineffable personal name of God, flies like a bird, and practices magic, for which he is convicted in a trial. He is then both hanged and stoned at the same time, all under the reign of Queen Helene of Israel (a person who never actually existed). So you can see how it has a mythical character and includes distorted elements from the gospels.

This book also claims that he was born with the name Yehoshua (Joshua), meaning "The LORD saves." But when he did not cover his head when walking past the Sanhedrin, the rabbis in this story felt insulted and they renamed him *Yeshu*, based on an acronym from the first letters of the Hebrew words *Yimach Sh'mo V'zichro*, meaning "May his name and memory be obliterated."

Numerous fanciful and contradictory details of *Toledot Yeshu* has left the book without any historical credibility. Instead, it seems reasonable to conclude that nearly 1,000 years after Yeshua, someone who despised the real person of Yeshua, devised an acronym that was similar to his name, and that presented an attractive alternative so that opponents did not have to pronounce his actual name.

From that time onward, it didn't matter that the book wasn't considered to be credible. The name stuck, much in the way that Santa Claus has superseded the real man named Nicholas, bishop of Myra in Turkey. Thus in Jewish communities, where people had no exposure to the real man named Yeshua because the gospels were considered to be heretical, *Yeshu* was the only name that they ever knew, and they assumed it to be the actual name of the person that Christians were talking about.

It is this perception that has carried forward to our modern day, so that the average Israeli may consider Jesus to be a real Jewish man, but he was either delusional or his reputation was distorted by his followers. And it doesn't matter that if they understand the Hebrew acronym that forms his name; he is simply *Yeshu* to them.

So it is interesting to note that the attempts to deface the name of Jesus or Yeshua are literal applications of the words of the acronym. Using Wite-Out on a commemorative plaque is all about obliterating the name of Jesus. And using a tool to scratch away the last letter of Yeshua, transforms it to the only name they have known—*Yeshu*.

Responding to the truth about Yeshua and Yeshu

When you hear something like this, it is very easy to be cynical, especially toward Orthodox Jews, but toward Jews in general. After all, groups that hate Jews have used things like this throughout history to justify their animosity. Their perverse reasoning is that since negative things can be found in the Talmud, therefore all Jews are evil.

But for those who believe in Yeshua and have received the salvation that His name represents, we are called to have a very different attitude. I believe strongly that we are called to practice empathy, and that is because they are spiritually blind.

We see this condition depicted in the transformation of the name *Yeshua* into *Yeshu*. The difference is that there is no *ayin* at the end of the word in *Yeshu*, and that has symbolic meaning. Each of the letters of the original Paleo Hebrew alphabet was shaped as a representation of a

physical object. In the case of the *ayin*, it is based on the shape of the human eye. Moreover, *ayin* is also the Hebrew word for eye. So when you say *ayin*, you can be referring to the letter of the alphabet or your eye.

What, then, are the implications? The eye is our means of vision. So when you remove the *ayin* from Yeshua, it is like removing your spiritual vision—you can't see Him for who He is. This symbolically depicts what has happened in the greater Jewish community. The rabbis contributed to this situation by promoting a false sense of the person of Yeshua. They obscured the vision of the Jewish people who trusted them to lead truthfully, which they did not do.

But this issue goes even deeper than medieval and Talmudic times, back to the time of the Bible. Because of the disobedience of the people in the days that led to the Babylonian captivity, God declared: "Render the hearts of this people insensitive, their ears dull, and their eyes dim" (Isa 6:10). And again the Apostle Paul writes:

For I do not want you, brethren, to be uninformed of this mystery—so that you will not be wise in your own estimation—that a partial hardening has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in.

This spiritual state is very similar to what happened to Pharaoh when Moses asked him to release the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt. Again and again, Moses said, "Let my people go" and we are told that Pharaoh hardened his heart and said no. But later, when Moses returned and made his request, we are told that *God* hardened Pharaoh's

heart. It's like saying, "You had an opportunity to comply, but you refused and I am now turning you over entirely to your defiant way of thinking."

In the case of the people of Israel, their widespread refusal to believe in Yeshua as Messiah has led to a general hardening and spiritual blindness within the community. Yes, there are exceptions, as there has always been a faithful remnant of believers in Yeshua in every generation. But the blindness and hardness is still there in a general sense. And that is very tragic.

Drawing a parallel between physical and spiritual blindness is fitting. It seems right that when someone is spiritually blind that we should treat them in a similar way to how we treat those who are physically blind. When you see someone tapping a white cane in front of them while walking down the sidewalk, a decent person might feel moved to help them in some way. And the reason we do that is because we empathize with their plight in life.

The same is true for those who are spiritually blind. We may not be able to restore their sight, but we can point out when they are headed in the wrong direction. And that includes communicating the truth about Yeshua that brings light into the darkness that has engulfed them throughout their lives.

My hope is that we all can find ways to let our Jewish neighbors know the truth about Yeshua—that He was a real man, the real Messiah, the true and living Son of God, the one who died in our place for our sins, just like the prophets foretold. He rose from the dead and now sits at the right hand of the Father. And He will return in power and majesty to receive all who believe in Him into His presence forever and ever. It all

begins with simply being able to accept the reality of His name.

Now it should be noted that not everyone despises the name of Yeshua. Many people in this world, including a great number of Israelis, consider Him to be a good man, a good rabbi or a good prophet. But calling Him good is not good enough. We must embrace His greatness.

How to recognize true greatness

In popular culture, the more powerful you become, or the more money that you give, or the more skilled that you are in sports or the arts, the more likely it will be that you are perceived as being great. And when you do those kinds of things, your name becomes associated with that perception of greatness. That is especially true if your name is displayed in a hall of fame or spelled out across the outside of a building.

God's Word declares otherwise. Paul begins the second chapter of Philippians with a general exhortation that establishes the foundation for the way that God views true greatness. It's all about humility:

Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others (Phil 2:3-4).

That is a radical difference from our natural tendency as human beings to regard ourselves as the most important thing around. It's about developing the kind of humility in our lives that makes us *other*-focused. It's seeing the blind person and going out of your way to help. It's seeing a spiritually blind person and caring enough

about his or her salvation that you are willing to endure ridicule for your testimony. And Paul links that way of thinking to our great example in Yeshua.

Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Messiah Yeshua, who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men (vv. 5-7).

Notice that Yeshua is equal with God, but He doesn't abuse it. That's what the word translated as "grasped" (KJV, "robbery") conveys. In books like *Toledot Yeshu* the Jesus character is always showing off in supernatural ways. Hollywood movies with a God character always do the same thing. But that is not Yeshua. He was equal to the Father in divine attributes and power, but He never treated that reality in an undignified way while walking this earth.

The word translated as "form" in these verses expresses the way that He appears. He starts out in one form or appearance of God in all His glory, but He "emptied Himself," which has the sense of setting aside all of that glory, and then took on the form of a bond-servant with the appearance of a man. He never stopped being God.

He just looked different and acted accordingly. It's like a king putting on the clothing of a peasant, leaving his palace and going out into the alleyways. He's still the king, but for the moment, he appears in the form of a peasant. Then, to take this metaphor a bit further, the king dressed as a peasant intervenes on behalf of another peasant who is about to be killed in a fight, but the king ends up dying instead. That's what Paul shows about Yeshua:

Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross (v. 8).

That is what makes Yeshua truly great. Since, God esteems those who demonstrate humility, it makes sense that Yeshua's unparalleled act of humility would lead to the greatest exaltation :

For this reason also, God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth. (v. 9).

Since the name of Yeshua is associated with the lowest act of humility of all, His name will reach the highest exaltation of all—above the prophets, above the powerful

rulers of history, above the renowned spiritual leaders of this world. No other name means salvation and belongs to the One who now rules over heaven and earth.

So while there are those who try to erase His name and insult Him with the words, "May his name and memory be obliterated," let it be said that His name will last forever. That is true greatness.

It's not enough to say that Yeshua was a good man or a good teacher. As we are told in Philippians 2:11, everyone has to "confess that Yeshua the Messiah is Lord, to the glory of God the Father." The word translated as confess literally means, "to say the same word." It's a description of agreement. God has declared that Yeshua is Lord over all. And we are called to be in agreement by saying the same thing.

Does that describe you? Have you confessed to God that Yeshua is the Messiah of Israel and the Lord over all creation? Indeed, is He the Lord over *your own life*? God is calling Jew and Gentile alike to make that affirmation.

May we all do something great with our lives by doing it God's way—with humility and with the truth about the real person Yeshua.

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American Remnant Mission

Post Office Box 2321
Pleasant Hill, California 94523

[925] 943-6061

E-mail: arm@remnant.net
Internet: www.remnant.net



Dr. Galen Peterson, Executive Director