



The Man from Nazareth: Yeshu or Yeshu'a

31.10.2017 | David Neuhaus

Father David Neuhaus, Latin Patriarchal Vicar until his resignation in August 2017, published an open letter to the Israeli newspaper "HaAretz" about the use of the name Jesus in Hebrew. "HaAretz" published the letter on March 24, 2017. The letter reads as follows.

HaAretz published a long article reviewing the wonderful exhibition at the Israel Museum of Jewish and Israeli art depicting the man from Nazareth (16.2.2017). The exhibition is the courageous work of the Museum's curator Amitai Mendelson, who has also done important research on the subject of the man from Nazareth in Israeli art. The subject is sensitive as many Jews are not neutral when it comes to the man from Nazareth and the consequences that belief in him as Messiah had on Jewish history. I would like to raise one issue about the article in HaAretz and about the exhibition: the use of the name "Yeshu" for the man from Nazareth.

The Israel Museum's exhibition has not been alone in putting a spotlight on the man from Nazareth. "And the earth was tohu and wohu", the history of the Land of Israel, produced for Israel Television, was a delight to watch, well made and fascinating. Chapter 8, "Between Independence and Ruin", dealt with the period from 63 BC to 70 AD and in it too there was a discussion of the figure of the man from Nazareth. It is highly commendable that those responsible for the program decided to use his proper name in Hebrew, Yeshu'a, rather than the commonly used Yeshu.

"Yeshu", whose origins are much disputed, took on a derogatory meaning in Jewish history, used uniquely for the man from Nazareth and is often understood as being an abbreviation for the expression "may his name and memory be effaced". Some have argued that the name "Yeshu'a" was pronounced "Yeshu" in the first century because speakers had difficulty with the letter "ayin" like many Ashkenazi Jews today. Nonetheless, not pronouncing a letter does not justify its disappearance in writing. This is even more true when one of the miracles of the Jewish people in recent times has been the resurrection of Hebrew as a modern language.

In the televised history of the Land of Israel, novelist Yochi Brandes, seated in the Synagogue Church in Nazareth, where Jesus taught according to tradition, explains to educator Yisca Harani: "Were it not that Christianity was taken up at some point by the Gentiles and became a religion that hated the Jewish people, an anti-Semitic religion, were it not for that, there is a big chance that in our view, that of the Jews, Jesus would really be considered as one of our great prophets throughout all the generations. What happened is that Christianity took Jesus from us. And by the way, I personally went through this process as I grew up over the years full of disgust, hatred for him. I called him "Yeshu". I despised him, I felt that he was like the father of anti-Semitism. Only as an adult I discovered who he is, who he really was, how he lived as a Jew and how he died as a Jew. Since then I respect him, even admire him. And I do not call him "Yeshu". Since then I call him "Yeshu'a". And in my eyes he is a great prophet."

It is perfectly understandable why Jews might have looked with contempt on Christians and on the man who Jews hold to be responsible for the initiation of this new religion. Too often and in too many places Jews suffered at the hands of Christians, enraged that most Jews refused to recognize Jesus as the Messiah. Jesus, seen as a renegade, was often perceived as responsible for the suffering of the Jews.

In the past decades, a major revolution has occurred within many of the Christian Churches. After the Shoah, many Christians recognized the bitter fruit of the “teaching of contempt” about Jews and Judaism. They are now seeking ways to correct the wrong and formulate a Christian teaching of respect for Jews and Judaism, which recognizes the common heritage that Jews and Christians share and celebrates the Jewish identity of the man from Nazareth. This has produced a flourishing dialogue between Jews and Christians and many common projects that deal with joint attempts to work for “tikkin olam” (the repairing of a broken world).

In this spirit, perhaps it is time for all those who welcome this change to restore the name of Jesus to the man from Nazareth. The only written sources we have for him are in Greek and he shares in Greek the same name with Joshua son of Nun. Christians who speak Hebrew call him “Yeshu'a”, a common Second Temple period abbreviation of the name “Yehoshua”.

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