

## Why Does the Koran Call Jesus 'Îsâ Instead of Yasû` (Arabic equivalent of the Hebrew Yešû`a), The Name Arab Christians Have Always Used?

Since the birth of Western Islamology, researchers have tried to understand why the Koranic name of Jesus is rendered by the consonants 'YSW instead of YSW', as if the final **'ayn** (') had shifted forward. Indeed, the Koranic text gives **Îsâ**, while Arab Christians say **Yasû`**. The problem is that, linguistically speaking, a consonant cannot move by 3 whole positions inside a word. This sort of morphologic change is simply not seen. Research used to face an impasse that no hypothesis could solve. As a general observation, rather than the beginning of an answer, the publication of the thesis [Le messie et son prophète](#) made a parallel between the incompleteness of the name of YSW (without the final «'») and the not-yet-full realization of its meaning– **Yešû`a** means « Salvation » or « He saves » in Hebrew, and according to the very messianic vision of the «Nazarenes », full salvation had not happened yet. However, the initial «'» of 'Îsâ could not be explained.

The fact of the matter is that, thanks to Dye and Kropp we know now that only philology – a discipline where Dr. Kropp is an authority as much from a theoretical point of view as from the practical expertise in Semitic Studies– can help account for the shift from YSW' to 'YSW, if we consider spoken Arabic. In spoken Arabic, the tendency is "to add an **'ayn** to arabicize a borrowed word. It is still the case today, for example with *ma`karûna*, borrowed from the Italian *maccheroni*" (p.184). This perspective had not been much examined until recently, maybe because the field was still strongly under the spell suggesting that the Koran was written by God (God being able to call whoever He wishes by whatever name He wishes), or because of the so-called Arab « polytheists » (obviously forbidden to use the name of Jesus).

To illustrate the evolution that must have taken place in popular Arabic pronunciation, the authors make use of numerous examples of Koranic « alterations » of proper names (for instance the Syriac *Šîmûn* became *Sulaymân* in Arabic, with the š changed into a s as in 'Îsâ) – but also cite examples found outside the Koran, observing that:

"If one attempts to explain the form 'Îsâ solely on the basis of linguistic elements, one will find that it is reasonable to start from the Aramean form YSÛ', present under various forms in the late Ancient Aramean dialects, for instance as ysw' in Syriac, vowelized Yêšû' in Western Syriac and Îšô' in Eastern Syriac (pronounced Îšô', the final 'ayn being dropped in the Eastern Syriac pronunciation)" (p.184).

Indeed, it is a "simple (and plausible) method to start from the idea that the transmission was primarily oral. From there, beginning with the pronunciation of Îšô', i.e. Îšô, things are easy to explain, as FRAENKEL has shown : **a)** drop of the final 'ayn in the pronunciation of the Aramean word; **b)** shift from -ô to -â ; **c)** shift from -š- to -s- ; **d)** addition of a 'ayn at the beginning [...]

The question is not so much of the number of changes than of the logic of those changes – and appears to be all the more arbitrary that we find all of those changes (except for the drop of the final 'ayn , which depends of course of the borrowed term) wrapped in a single example, that is, the word Ascalon (city of Ashqelôn), often mentioned in the Bible (see *Amos* 1:8). The Arabic word 'asqâlân or 'asqulân must be compared with the Syriac 'ašqalûn and the Hebrew 'ašqelôn: here again we find the shift of *alif* (') to 'ayn (') at the beginning, as well as the shifting of -š- to -s- and of ô /û to â " (p.187).

In *La fondation de l'Islam* (2002), A.-L. de Prémare had already alluded to the spelling of «'Îsâ» in some Arabic graffiti (thus quite close to the spoken language) discovered by Y. Nevo in the Negev region– undated but seemingly contemporary with the emergence of Arabic Islam –; this kind of popular pronunciation of the name of Jesus was therefore used in formulations outside the Koran (p.197). The answer becomes even clearer if we remember that the leaflets used later in the com-

position of the Koran of the Caliphs were rough drafts of sermons intended to indoctrinate the Arabs: as we know, any wise preacher tries to address his audience by imitating the pronunciation of the locals. Moreover, that audience must have been very well acquainted with the content of their preaching, otherwise they would have missed the message altogether: consequently, this audience was made up of [Christian Arabs](#). More than likely, they also were geographic neighbors: we actually have a matching description in the Quraysh tribe, then dwelling in northern Syria and who came [from Mesopotamia](#). We apologize for quashing the legend of the « Arab polytheists » invented to substantiate the idea of a new Revelation given by God to the Arabo-muslims of Mecca, but facts are facts.

We would like to conclude by saying that this study solves an old enigma: How to account for the lack of diacritics in the most ancient Korans, since the practice of adding diacritical marks was [common at that time](#)? More than likely, the leaflets used to compose the Koran were simply the crude drafts of sermons.

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**One last remark:** There is another name which receives a similar treatment in the Koran: the name of John, changed into *Yahya*. Like *ʿĪsā*, is it possible that the name of *Yahya* is a twisted form (of *Yuhanna*, the Arabic rendition of the Hebrew *Yohannan*) reflecting the popular speech of Arab Christians? Some Nabataeans, anterior to the Koran, attest the usage. It is objected that another explanation would be a wrong reading: the consonantic *ductus* (that is: manual and without diacritics) of *يحيى* is read *Yahya* as well as *Yuhanna*. Coincidence or not? At this stage of the research, it is impossible to say, or even to decide if one [theory excludes the other](#).

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