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*Chief Representative of the Lazarus Union
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CHRISTMAS STORY 2025

A CHILD IN DIAPERS, A WORLD IN TURMOIL

Christmas is approaching, that time of year when even self-proclaimed atheists suddenly become sentimental, supermarkets are filled with Gregorian chants and the world collectively agrees to pretend for a few days that peace is not just a word from the lexicon of naivety. And in the midst of this mulled wine-soaked consensus stands once again Jesus of Nazareth, probably the most misunderstood child in world history. Hardly any other historical figure has been so thoroughly decontextualised, relabelled, ideologically recycled and morally adopted. Jesus, the universal projection screen. Jesus, the first influencer without Instagram. Jesus, who now has to serve as a symbol for everything: for pacifism as well as for crusades, for charity as well as for political activism, for esotericism, veganism, socialism and, more recently, for geopolitical simplifications that can be conveniently squeezed into 280 characters.

Sometimes it would be progress to agree on the most boring thing: the historical facts. Not out of dogmatism, but out of respect. Because if you're already confusing the coordinates, you should perhaps hold back a little with interpretations.

JUDEA IS NOT A HASHTAG, BUT HISTORY

Jesus was Jewish. Not "felt", not "spiritual", not "in a broader sense", but quite prosaically, quite concretely, quite ethnically, quite religiously. He was born in Judea, grew up in Galilee and lived in a world deeply imbued with Judaism – in rituals, language, thinking, hopes and conflicts. His parables are hardly understandable without the Jewish scriptural tradition, his debates are simply meaningless without the culture of internal Jewish debate. Jesus was not an outsider to his religion, but a product of its internal tensions. He did not criticise "Judaism" as a whole, but certain aspects of it – just as prophets before him had done.

However, Jesus did not know the word "Palestine". None of his contemporaries knew it. It simply did not exist in this context. The name "Syria Palaestina" was only introduced more than a century later by Emperor Hadrian – as a political act of humiliation after the Bar Kochba revolt, the desperate, bloody uprising of the indigenous Jewish people against the Roman occupying power. The name was not a geographical

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coincidence, but imperial symbolic politics: the name Judea was erased and replaced with an allusion to the Philistines, the ancient archenemies of Israel. Colonialism often begins with renaming.

So Jesus was never Palestinian. Not because anyone should be denied anything, but because history does not accept retroactive labels. Those who declare Jesus to be Palestinian say less about Jesus than about their own need to make him serve today's narratives.

ARABIC CAME LATER, MUCH LATER

Equally unpalatable is the claim that Jesus was Arab or spoke Arabic. Arab expansion did not reach the region until around 600 years after his death. At the time of Jesus, Arabic was neither a lingua franca nor a cultural language there. Jesus spoke Aramaic, the everyday language of the region. Hebrew was the language of religious texts, Latin the language of the occupiers, and Greek the language of trade and the educated elites. Multilingualism was a reality, but Arabic was not part of it. Those who Arabise Jesus are not exercising historical sensitivity, but rather anachronism with a political bias.

It is roughly equivalent to declaring Socrates an EU citizen because Athens is now in Europe. It may feel good, but it does not assist anyone in their thinking.

THE STRANGE DESIRE TO REINTERPRET

So why this urge to rename, recode and rework Jesus? Perhaps because a Jewish Jesus makes some people uncomfortable. A Jesus who was firmly rooted in Judaism disrupts simple perpetrator-victim narratives. He cannot be so easily exploited. A Jewish Jesus reminds us that Christianity is inconceivable without Judaism – a reminder that has all too often been suppressed, denied or violently overwritten throughout history.

And perhaps it is also the modern aversion to complexity. History is cumbersome. It contradicts moral shortcuts. It refuses to fit neatly into contemporary templates. So it is smoothed over, simplified, relabelled – until it is palatable. The fact that, at Christmas of all times, the Jewish itinerant preacher from Judea is robbed of his own history is a bitter irony that even a satirist would hardly need to exaggerate.

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A WINK AT THE END, BUT NO CARTE BLANCHE

It's okay to laugh about all this. Sarcastically, cynically, with a wink. It's okay to point out the absurdity of a man from the 1st century being reduced to a mascot for today's Twitter debates. But there's one thing we shouldn't lose sight of: respect for history and for people whose identity cannot be arbitrarily shifted.

Jesus was Jewish. He lived in Judea and Galilee. He spoke Aramaic. He was not a Palestinian, not an Arab, not a modern activist and not a hashtag. He was a man of his time – and perhaps that is precisely why he remains challenging to this day.

And if we are going to tell stories at Christmas, then for once we could at least try not to rewrite

Dear members, friends and supporters of the Lazarus Union!

On behalf of Lazarus Union International, I wish a Merry Christmas to all who celebrate it, hope that our friends who celebrated the Festival of Lights (even in the face of the Australian tragedy) had a bright and meaningful Hanukkah, and extend warm and heartfelt greetings to all who cherish this season of hope and togetherness.

May this season bring peace, kindness and unity not only to the Lazarus Union, but to all hearts and communities around the world.

A handwritten signature in green ink, which appears to read "O.M. Gruber-Lavin".

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