BIBLICAL ONOMASTICS: WHAT'S IN A NAME?

FRED BLUMENTHAL

In our contemporary societies, names for newborns are commonly chosen from a selection of existing names belonging to the cultural and linguistic group of which the parents are part. In many instances, the choice is intended to perpetuate the memory of forebears or to honor members of the family or cultural heroes.

In sharp contrast to these methods of naming, biblical names are rarely repeated. They were uniquely created to express parental sentiments at the time of birth. It may be gratitude to the Lord, as with the names of Moses' son Eliezer (Ex. 29:4) and of Samuel (I Sam. 1:20). It could be a prayer for the newborn's future, as with the name Joshua, or a re-affirmation of the parents' belief in God, as with the name Elitzur (Num. 1:5), or other emotions predominating at that moment. At times, biblical names have predictive connotations as, for example, Noah, and Joseph. In the very earliest chapters of Genesis names seem to represent a description of historical epochs and their development.

In some cases, the Bible quotes the explanations of the name-giver for his/her choice, as, for example, in the naming of the sons of Jacob. In most instances, however, it is left to the reader to explore what is implied in the name which has been created. Often a variety of interpretations are possible.

It is imperative that these interpretations correspond to the spirit of the Bible as a whole. The Tanakh is not a book of history which records events just because they happened, nor does it chart locations to teach the geography of the area. The apparent purpose of the Bible is to teach and disseminate the belief in monotheism, to persuade the reader of its truth, and to induce him to observe the rituals demanded by the Creator. The meaning of a name, it can be assumed, should correspond to this overriding goal of the biblical writings. The names, to be properly fitted into this major theme of the Book, must evidence connectedness to the ideological objective thereof.

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The roots of the names which we encounter, be they Hebrew or from other languages of the era, were undoubtedly recognizable to the readers of the period in which the text was first put into writing. Because the expressions of that era are no longer part of our contemporary language this ability has often been lost; but we can at times recreate it by linguistic comparisons. A successful attempt to do so is likely to be rewarded with a deeper understanding of this ancient text. Additionally, it may lead to an explanation of why some individuals are mentioned by name while others of the same generation and parentage have been left out, at times with the cryptic remark *and he sired sons and daughters*.

From the explanations of names, when they are offered, emerges the principle that when creating a name grammatical accuracy can be suspended and weak letters can be omitted or substituted. When, for example, Adam called his wife Hava, he most likely meant it as a substitute for the word *haya* [animal], alluding to the fact that she will be the bearer of children, just like the females of the inferior creatures. Hava called her first son Kayin [Cain], adding the letter "*yud*" to the word *kana* [to buy], which served as its explanation. Such additions, deletions, or shifting of letters are one of the rules which help to discover the meaning of biblical names. When searching for the meaning of unexplained names, we may assume they are a distortion of the original word from which they seem to have been derived.

THE 13 SONS OF YOKTAN

A vivid example of the importance of explaining and understanding names is offered by the enumeration of the names of the 13 sons of Yoktan (Gen. 10:26-29). Yoktan's father, Eber, as we are told in Genesis 11:17, sired sons and daughters who like so many others remain unnamed. A notable exception is made in listing the names of his sons Peleg and Yoktan. The former belongs to the genealogy leading to Abraham. His name is explained as a reference to the story of the Tower of Babel (10:25). He lived at the time when the split into diverse linguistic and cultural groups occurred. Peleg, therefore, represents, in his symbolic meaning, the need for the emergence of Abraham several generations later. Had no such divergence occurred, had the human race remained one unified cultural and religious entity, the story of the Patriarchs would not have fitted into the history of mankind as reported in the

Bible.

Yoktan's sons had to be enumerated in detail, in contrast to his many uncles, cousins, and nephews, because they represent the new and divergent cultures and religions which started to emerge as the result of the development which is described in the story of the Tower. Their names need to be identified with the cultural developments which necessitated the re-creation of pure monotheism in the days of Abraham.

These are their names and my attempt to demonstrate how these names describe the divergent religions which evolved, and the social and cultural values of the population of the time.[1]

ALMODED: "The one who is not in the count [*al moded*]" refers to an individual who may be qualified to fill a position, but has been bypassed. This interpretation of the name parallels the names of Eldad and Medad, the prophets who were excluded from leadership in the story in Numbers (Num. 11:26ff).

SHALEF: From the word *shalef* [unsheathe a sword], referring to a warrior who enforces his own rules in disregard of the laws of general ethics and morality.

HATZARMAVETH: Literally "courtyard of death." Midrash Rabba associates this name with religious fanaticism. It assigns to it the meaning of a monastic life which concentrates on the expectation of death and desists from participating in the general activities of mankind.

YERAKH: This name quite obviously parallels the word *yare'akh* [moon], and thereby indicates the religious attachment to heavenly bodies, the forerunner of idol worship.

HADORAM: Derived from *hadar* [glory] and often describing the glory of God. In this name it more likely refers to self-aggrandizement as, for example, in Proverbs 25:6. It points, then, to the deification of man, another form of idol worship.

UZAL: The meaning of this word is clearly brought out in I Samuel 9:7, where it translates as "emptiness." In our context it describes a religious emptiness, a form of atheism, which denies any guidance of the world by a deity.

DIKLA: The root of this name is found in Jeremiah 54:4 and II Kings 25:1, translating as a tower-like structure erected to attack the bulwark of a city. The name therefore refers to aggressive war-like activity.

AUVEL: This name seems to share its origin with that of Mount Ebal (Deut. 11:29), the mountain towards which the curses were to be addressed. The nature of these curses (27:15ff) is associated with secret violations – so that this name appears to point to religious pretensions in public and disobedience to religion in private.

AVIMA'EL: This can be interpreted as "*avi ma El*," –the first to ask "Who is this God?" in the same manner as the Egyptian king who asks this question (Ex. 5:2). That is the one who absolutely denies the existence of a God other than his own, or the competence of such a deity in his domain.

SHEVO: By substituting a "*tzaddi*" for the first letter of this name we read *Tzevo* [leader of an army unit].

OFER: The Hebrew word for dust, comparable to Genesis 18:27, this name represents a form of self-denial; the attitude that "God is too great to care about me," wherefore I need not pay heed to Him.

HAVILA: This name is not exclusive in the family of Yoktan. It also appears among the descendents of Ham. It parallels the name of one of the four rivers that flow from Eden, the one which flows through the land that produces gold. In this context it represents human greed.

YOVAV: This name is best understood when comparing it to Judges 5:28. There, the word imitates the sound of fear and apprehension. In the context of Yoktan's family, it represents a religion solely concerned with defense against disaster – in contrast to Abraham who rose to an all-time relationship with his God.

In summary, it appears as if these 13 names paint a picture of the world into which Abraham was born. This world, judging from these names, consisted of a society preoccupied with warfare (Shalef, Dikla, Shevo), and adhering to a variety of man-made religions (Yerakh, Hadoram, Uzal, Avima'el, Yovav, Auvel). The population of this era had apparently lost the monotheistic belief which had existed in the days of Noah, and is involved in idolatry, warfare, and the search for wealth (Havila). Those who reach for higher values or have retained some of the values of earlier generations have withdrawn from the sinful surrounding and secluded themselves, awaiting death (Hatzarma-vet, Ofer). The exceptions, represented by the name of Almoded, did not ac-quire persuasive strength and therefore were bypassed as leaders.[2]

Names, so we can learn here, are not just included for historical records, but rather seem to express an analysis of the events which follow. The need for the appearance of the Patriarchs of Israel is elucidated by the names of Yoktan's sons.

The aforementioned attempts to explain the meaning of biblical names are presented as examples, that it may be hoped pave the way for additional studies to connect such names with the teachings of the Bible. There may be variations between pre-historic names which were used here and those of later times, but what they have in common is that they have a meaning in connection with biblical philosophy.

This approach to biblical onomastics can throw new light on stories and tales found throughout the Bible. Understanding the meaning of names can augment our comprehension of the reasons why these tales have been included and how they fit into the overriding philosophy that the Bible wants to promulgate.

NOTES

1. My translations differ in a few cases from the ones offered by the Targum Rav Yosef in Chronicles. I have taken this liberty in order to create a common thread for the inclusion of all 13 names.
2. Compare my article "Eldad and Medad," *Jewish Bible Quarterly,* XXXVI:2 (2008) pp.88-92.

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עשה תורתך קבע
THE TRIENNIAL BIBLE READING CALENDAR
DEDICATED TO THE MEMORY OF CHAIM ABRAMOWITZ

April	Deuteronomy	31 – 34
	Joshua	1 – 24
May	Judges	1 – 21
	I Samuel	1 – 8
June	I Samuel	9 – 31
	II Samuel	1 – 5
July	II Samuel	6 – 24
	I Kings	1 – 9
August	I Kings	10 – 22
	II Kings	1 – 15

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