

Names to Remember

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The more attention I pay to Bible characters' names, the more I am persuaded that many are a likely a memorialization of their signature work or role, rather than their given name. I think I can understand why this might be, too. In a culture which relied on an oral tradition of history for centuries as the Hebrews did, it proves a very beneficial *aide memoire*.

Primarily, it's clear names are extremely important to God. He orchestrated an angelic visitation to Mary just to deliver a message centered specifically on naming His Son. God insisted His Son's name be 'God Saves' (Y'hôshûa', Ἰησοῦς, Jesus), which absolutely defines Jesus' message – and role. God even arranged similar Divine insistence to name Jesus' cousin John, too. He frequently changed names for people He deemed important: Abram to Abraham, Sarai to Sarah, Jacob to Israel, etc. And those are just the cases where God obviously intercedes. Throughout scripture, we see names which are oddly suited to their owners' life story, which suggests the names by which we know them are communicating who they are or what they did, more than being the given names of their parents. Consider the evidence.

The Bible introduces us to a man from Uz who suffers severe trials in life; and we meet him by the name 'Persecuted' (Îyôḥ), which seems unlikely to be his given name. Some even argue that 'Îyôḥ' can be rendered "no father,"¹ which would be even more contextually perfect, since Job is presented as a priest after the order of Melchizedek,² and the signature motif of these priests was that, like their forebear Melchizedek, they would historically spring from nowhere, as one having *neither father nor mother, nor beginning of days nor end of life* (Heb 7:3). There is also a prophet named Dove (Yônâ) who spends three days and three nights under the sea before emerging alive. He is the only human to physically enact the symbol of baptism, which represents the gospel hope of being raised alive after being dead and buried. God had always chosen the dove to be present at archetypal baptisms, from the Genesis Flood baptizing the whole Earth to the baptism of His own Son, rendering the prophet's name Yônâ so perfect as to likely be an attribution.

In fact, from the beginning, the Man Adam was named after his constitution: red clay. The Bible narrates: *God took the Clay ('ādāmā) and formed the Man ('ādām)* (Gen 2:7). From the very beginning his name was mud, so to speak, which would at least communicate a profound connection to the Earth, a reason for humility, and a self-awareness of impermanence. This may be God's

¹ Jack Balchin, "Sitting with Job," 1998, p5

² John A. Pople, "To Speak Well of God," 2009, p251-254

precedent for Bible names to be chosen for who people really are, or what role they truly embody, rather than the lesser detail of the moniker their parents chose. If true, this principle opens fascinating new lines of insight into our Leading Ladies.

Where Adam was named after his composition, Eve seems to have been named to reflect her *purpose*: to be mother of all the living (Gen 3:20). ‘Eve’ in English merely means ‘Beginning’ or ‘Preceding.’ But in Hebrew the point is stronger: her name is Ḥāwâ, arguably drawn from the verb Hayah,³ to Live. Her name is LIFE, expressed as an outward breath, which is a critical declaration of the role of woman, which we explore elsewhere.

Hagar was an immigrant, a slave, and a concubine; she was as far outside the preferred social clique as one could be. It’s a well-known Hebrew paradigm to infer connections via similar sounding words and her name, Hāgār, is clearly reminiscent of the term ‘Outsider’: Haggēr.⁴ Hagar’s life is presented as a constant battle with her mistress – and owner – who is from the opposite end of the social spectrum: the socially well-placed, highly-treasured wife of the community leader, whose name is ‘Princess’ (Śāray). ‘Outsider’ versus ‘Princess’: Hagar never stood a chance.

The Book of Ruth offers striking evidence on this theme. The opening character despairingly cries: “Don’t call me Pleasant (Nā’ōmî), call me Bitter, (Mārā)” (Ruth 1:20) so her name ‘Naomi’ may be an attribution – albeit the quote works equally well if her real name is Naomi. But she has two sons, whose only role in the narrative is to die, and their names are Sickness (Maḥlôn) and Destruction (Killāyôn), which seem unlikely to have been chosen by parents. Naomi also has two daughters-in-law, both bereaved by her sons’ passing. Naomi is in dire straits, unable to help either one, so she suggests they leave her and seek survival elsewhere. The one who immediately takes off over the horizon is ‘Gazelle’ (Ārpâ) while the other, our Leading Lady, who swears to never leave Naomi’s side for life, come what may, is named ‘Friendship’ (Rûṭ).

Deborah is introduced as “wife of Lapîdôt,” meaning ‘fire’ or ‘burning torch.’ As we shall see, a likely translation is: “Deborah is a firebrand woman!” which is highly believable for a woman who both judged Israel and was unafraid to physically take to the battlefield. It’s possible that there’s even a Divinely implanted symbiotic nod to Samson’s later riddle of sweetness in strength too, from the honey he found in the lion carcass, since the fiery, strong woman is named Honey Bee (D^hbôrâ), a connection Boling also notices.⁵

Similarly, Jael is introduced as “wife of Heber the Kenite,” which may translate: “woman among a group (heber) of Kenites.” Relevantly this family branch were traitors to Israel, having allied with Jabin king of Hazor. Jael alone was loyal to Jahweh, Israel’s God. Her name, if taken as a single syllable, is merely ‘Mountain Goat’ (Yā’ēl), but as a compound word ‘Yā’ēl’ is rendered ‘Jah is God,’ which is strikingly relevant for her lone fidelity amidst the unfaithful Kenites.

Jephthah, via the Hebrew ‘Yiptāḥ,’ (‘I have opened [my mouth]’) is, by some extension, named after his fateful vow, which we expound more fully elsewhere. It is possible to see him named

³ Robert Alter, “Genesis,” 1996, p15

⁴ Tikva Frymer-Kensky, “Reading the Women of the Bible,” 2002, p226

⁵ Robert G. Boling, “Judges,” in “The Anchor Bible,” Eds. William F. Albright & David N. Freedman, 1975, p94

“The Vow”⁶ therefore, and his daughter, the Story’s Leading Lady, is thus named: “The Daughter of the Vow,” which seems less demeaning than her being known for eternity only as the daughter of her father’s name. The message becomes that both father and daughter are changed forever by the infamous Vow, and both are eternally scarred with names evocative of it thereafter.

Esther’s Jewish name is ‘Myrtle’ (Hădaççâh), and myrtles are trees whose only Biblical significance was to once contain the Angel of God who was zealous to fight for Jerusalem (Zech 1:8-16). She is given the name ‘Esther’ by her captors, which in their tongue means ‘Star.’ Both Esther and Mordecai may have been given names stylized on the Babylonian gods ‘Ishtar’ and ‘Marduk,’ because it may amuse the Persian rulers, who overthrew the Babylonians, to metaphorically enslave their gods by naming their captives after them. But of most interest is that ‘Esther,’ in Hebrew, means ‘hidden’⁷ which perfectly describes her status in the Persian court in Susa. She is the hidden Jew, who, if she is to preserve her life and save her people, must remain hidden (‘Estêr) until the time is right at Purim to unleash the angel zealous for Jerusalem; who is currently concealed in the myrtle tree (Hădaççâh).

Thus, even by listening to just our Leading Ladies’ names, it seems there is much to hear. How much more treasure may tumble out, we wonder, as their full stories unfold before us?

⁶ Tikva Frymer-Kensky, “Reading the Women of the Bible,” 2002, p109

⁷ Johnny Miles, “Reading Esther as Heroine: Persian Banquets, Ethnic Cleansing, and Identity Crisis,” *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 2015, 45, 3, p134