

BIBLICAL PERSONAL NAMES AND THE ARABIC LANGUAGE

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Biblical names have often puzzled both Bible scholars and linguists, as their meanings can often be obscure. Moreover, since the given name is ascribed, in most cases, to the named person's parents, relatives or other personalities, the etymology suggested is doubtful at times. Thus, the names of the twelve sons of Jacob were coined by their mothers, Leah and Rachel, who even decided the names of Jacob's children born to their maids, Bilha and Zilpa. The reason, for what may be described as 'folk etymology', is that sometimes two different roots are utilised to explain the etymology of the name.¹ One may add to it inconsistent spelling, variations of orthography, and elements not to be found elsewhere, making the whole name or part of it a kind of a *hapax legomenon*. Hence, Nöldeke's 'warning' about the caution with which etymologies of proper names should be suggested is both valuable and correct.²

The cognate Semitic languages of Hebrew have often been used by scholars and commentators since the Middle Ages, as a tool to explain the etymologies of comparable biblical roots, words and expressions, thus, shedding light on their usages. Since, as stated above, the meanings of some biblical names are unclear, the purpose of this article is to suggest different explanations with the help of the Arabic lexicon. That is to say, a meaning which does not exist in Hebrew or does not make sense, but is found in Arabic, may better explain the significance of the name. Let us examine a few examples.

1.

The etymology of the female name Billah (Rachel's maid) (Gen. 29:29) is not clear. According to the *Encyclopaedia Biblica* (II, s.v. בילה), Noth (1928) suggests that the name derives from the Arabic root بلى *blh* ('fool, ignorant'); Maisler thinks it is

¹ Cf. The roots זבל and זבר in the case of the name Zebulun (Gen. 30:20), or the roots אסף and יסף in the case of the name Joseph (Gen. 23, 24, 30).

² See Nöldeke's reservations regarding the proper names in the Book of Esther; *Encyclopaedia Biblica* (I, s.v. Esther 1402, and also 3274) as well as T. K. Cheyne, idem, (I, s.v. Name, 3270).

related to the noun of the same root בלהה *ballahah* ('terror, calamity'), and possibly referring to a theophoric name, or it might be a Hurrian name.³ Following Noth's suggestion, it seems to me that the name is indeed based on the Arabic meaning of 'fool, simple-minded'. This may reflect an ancient custom of giving to slaves and maids names that refer to their inferior status, or not mentioning their names at all.⁴

2.

The name Benjamin (בנימין) appears in the Bible about 200 times, mainly as a proper name, after whom one of the twelve tribes is named.⁵ According to the book of Genesis (35:18), it was coined by Jacob, who changed the name of his last child from *Ben-oni*, the name given to him by his mother, Rachel, to *Binyamin*. Most commentaries are of the opinion that the unusual name *Ben-oni*, which literally means 'the son of my sorrow', refers to the difficult labour of Rachel that resulted in her death. The name Benjamin, however, is understood to mean 'the son of my right hand'.⁶ Other suggestions are 'the son of the south' and 'the son of the days' (i.e. *yamin=yamim* 'days'), that is to say, 'the son of old age'.⁷

The word *yamīn* يمين in Arabic means 'right' and 'right hand', but the root *ymn* (ymn) denotes, in addition, 'good omen; good luck/fortune; blessing; prosperity' and 'success',⁸ and the geographical (later political) area named Yemen. These positive concepts had possibly come into being owing to some folkloric or superstitious beliefs in the advantage of the 'right' over the 'left'.⁹ Hence, it is possible that these meanings were used in Hebrew but were lost and are only found in this context and

³ Most linguists regard the words בלהה and בהלה *behalah* ('fear, panic') as metathesis, though in Arabic the root *bhl* بهل denotes 'cursing' or 'supplicate'.

⁴ See, for instance, Gen. 24:1–67, where Abraham's servant is the main character in the story, yet his name is not mentioned in the whole chapter or elsewhere. Some commentators, however, conclude from other references that his name was Eliezer.

⁵ Documents from Mari refer to tribes named *Bini-yamina*, who clashed with Mari inhabitants in the 18th century BC; see *Encyclopaedia Biblica* II, 263.

⁶ Both names are formed by the words בן *ben* ('son') and אוןי *on+i* ('my sorrow'), and בן *ben* + ימין *yamin* ('son of right hand'), respectively. It is worth mentioning that the Hebrew word *yamin* is polysemic, meaning 'right' (as opposed to left) and 'south', and is used metaphorically to indicate 'power' or 'strength' (cf., for instance, Ex. 15:6; Ps. 21:9) while the word און *on* is homonymic, meaning 'sorrow; power'.

⁷ Similarly, Benjamin is described in Gen. 44:20 as 'the child of old age', while in the Samaritan Pentateuch, the name *Binyaamem* means 'the son of days'.

⁸ Compare the Arabic name *Maymun*, which literally means 'the blessed, the good-fortuned', like in the case of Maimonides, whose father was called *Maymun*, hence his name was משה בן מימון, i.e. Moses the son of Maimon.

⁹ See, for example, in Judaism, *Talmud Bavli*, Sanhedrin 157; 2. As for Islam, see al-Buḥārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ* VII, 129, Chapter 194.

used by Jacob as an antonym for the word ‘sorrow’. That is to say, Benjamin is not ‘the son of sorrow’ but ‘the son of good fortune’. Incidentally, this proposal may be supported by the fact that out of almost 200 occurrences of the name Benjamin in the Bible only 13 times the name is spelt with two *yods*, i.e. בנימין, while in the overwhelming majority of the cases it is spelt with only one *yod* בנימן, thus allowing the option of using the noun *ymn* (ימן). If our assumption is correct, then the Arabic root *ymn*, meaning ‘good fortune’, helps us add another sense of the same root in Hebrew.

3.

The meaning of the name Gera, bore by one of the sons of Benjamin (Gen. 46:21), the father of Ehud (Jud. 3:15), as well as a few more biblical personalities, which has no certain etymology,¹⁰ may be explained with the help of the Arabic root جرأ (*ǧrʾ*), which denotes ‘boldness, daring’.¹¹

4.

The origin of the name Zilpa (Leah’s maid) is also shrouded in mystery (Gen. 29:24). Both the post-biblical root זלף (*zlf*), meaning ‘to spray, sprinkle’ and its synonymous biblical root דלף (*dlf*), meaning ‘drip, leak’ (e.g. Job 16:20; Ecc. 10:18) do not seem to solve the enigma about the etymology of this name.

The *Encyclopaedia Biblica* (II, s.v. זלף) quotes Noth (1928), who thinks that the name denotes, following Arabic, ‘high position’. Bauer refers to another Arabic root نلف (*nlf*), which means ‘to be small’ or ‘to have a small nose’, while Yeivin thinks that the name denotes ‘degradation’. Arabic dictionaries define the root زلف (*zlf*) as ‘draw near’ while the noun زلفة *zulfa* has a number of meanings, including ‘drawing near, high position; garden; bowl; part of the night; mother-of-pearl shell’, and more.

It seems to me that, since before becoming Rachel’s maid, Zilpa was Rachel’s father’s maid, it is highly unlikely that her name could denote ‘high position’. Instead, it is more likely that, if we are looking for its etymology in the Arabic lexicon, the meaning ‘mother-of-pearl shell’ is more plausible.

¹⁰ Some scholars link the name with the word *ger* ‘arrow’ in Ge’ez, or claim that it originated from the word *garger* (גרגר) ‘grain’, or a short version of a theophoric Phoenician name; see *Encyclopaedia Biblica* II, 550.

¹¹ Similarly to עזיהו, אביחיל, אמציה, נדב, אבינדב, etc. those names contain words which denote ‘courage’ (*oz*, *chayil*, *omets*) or generosity (*ndv*).

5.

The female name הל'אה (*hel'ah*) (1Ch. 4:5) shares *prima facie* the same root of the noun *hel'ah*, meaning: 'filth, dirt; rust'. However, as we cannot imagine that these meanings had been used as a proper name, it looks that the name had derived from another root with a more positive sense. Hence, the name is either related to the biblical Hebrew words חלי *hali* or הליה *helya* 'ornament', or it may be related to the Arabic word *hulwa* (حلوة) 'sweet; pleasant; pretty'.

6.

ימימה *Yemimah* was one of Job's three daughters (Job 42:14). The name has won the attention of many commentators and scholars, who associate it with the word יום *yom* ('day') in Hebrew or יממא *yemama* in Aramaic. Some scholars propose that it derived from the Arabic word يمامة *yamāma* ('dove, pigeon') (BDB), and even يميمة *yumayma* as a diminutive, meaning 'small dove' (*Encyclopaedia Biblica* II, s.v. ימימה). However, classical Arabic dictionaries give another meaning of the root يمم *ymm*,¹² that is to say, ميمم *muyammam*, meaning 'successful, lucky' (Hava). It is possible therefore that the name ימימה means 'the lucky, successful'.¹³

7.

The name ערפה 'Orpah appears in the Book of Ruth (1: 4, 14). Since the noun ערף '*oref* means in Hebrew 'back of the neck, nape', some commentators say that the name Orpah derives from the metaphorical use of the idiom פנה ערף *panah 'oref*, literally 'to turn the nape', i.e. 'to turn the back on, abandon', referring to Orpa, who abandoned Naomi, her mother-in-law. Among the scholars who tried to find a more convincing etymology, the *Encyclopaedia Biblica* (II, s.v. ערפה) mentions Van Zyl, who suggests the Arabic word عرف '*urf*, meaning 'mane of a horse; crest of a cock', which indicates figuratively 'long hair'. However, as the Arabic root is homonymic, other possibilities may equally be accepted. Some of the derivatives are: عرفة '*urfa* ('knowledge; beneficence, goodness, prominence, elevated place'); عرفة '*arfa* ('wind'); عرافة '*irāfa* ('witchcraft, divination'). Also, a metathesis of the name עפרה '*ofra* ('gazelle') (1Ch. 4:14) may be possible.

¹² It is possible that this root is a corrupt version of the root (*yim*); see above no. 2.

¹³ The problematic word הימם *hayemim* (Gen. 36:24) has also been explained as 'the wild pigeons', based on the Arabic word يمام *yamām*.

8.

קציעה Qesi'ah is one of Job's three daughters (Job 42:14). The name is usually associated with the word קציעות *qesi'ot* (Ps. 45:9), which means 'type of fragrance' or a spice believed by some scholars to be cinnamon. However, as the root قسح *qs'* in Arabic means, *inter alia*, 'to germinate, sprout; to be stunted' (Hava), it is possible that the name expresses affection and endearment for the young daughter by comparing her to a bud.

9.

The name רבקה Rivqah (Rebecca) has won the attention of a number of scholars, who have suggested several possibilities for its etymology. Among the suggestions offered are 'a female calf'; a tying rope of an animal; threshing; and even a metathesis בקרה (*baqara*), Hebrew בקר *baqar* 'cattle', and Arabic بقرة *baqara* 'cow' (Noth 1928: 10), or, following the name in the *Peshitta*, Rifqa and the root رفق *rfq* in Arabic, the meaning of the name is 'the soft, the flexible' (*Encyclopaedia Biblica*, II, s.v. רבקה). However, if metathesis is accepted as a possibility, then we may also add one of the meanings of the root קרב *qrb*, which denotes in most of the Semitic languages 'to be near', and the Hebrew noun קרבה *qirvah* and Arabic قرابة *qurba* ('nearness, relationship, kinship').¹⁴

10.

The name שמידע Shemida' (Jos. 17:2) is usually explained literally, i.e. 'know my name', or by some variations of the basic meanings of its components, referring to God or a god.¹⁵ Other suggestions relate it to the name Samidahum, which was found in Mari.¹⁶ However, the classical Arabic dictionaries mention the word سميدع *samayda'*,¹⁷ meaning 'noble, generous, or respected person; brave; fast; wolf; sword'. It is therefore very likely that at least one of these meanings is behind this biblical name, though the word is not found elsewhere in the Hebrew lexicon.

¹⁴ In biblical texts, this noun appears always in reference to relationship with God. See, for instance, Isa. 58:2 and Ps. 73:28, where the compound קרבת אלהים (*qirvat Elohim*) meaning 'closeness to God' is used.

¹⁵ As suggested, it is formed by the words שמי *shemi* 'my name' and דע *da'* 'know'. See also the etymology suggested by BDB, 1029; *Encyclopaedia Biblica* I, 3287.

¹⁶ See *Encyclopaedia Biblica*, II, Vol. VIII, 119.

¹⁷ See Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān*; while al-Bustānī (*Muḥīṭ*), gives the form سميدع (*samayda'*).

Conclusion

Following the tendency among linguists to search for unknown etymologies in cognate languages, and often even to borrow from them meanings of words and phrases when coining new words, an attempt has been made to account for obscure meanings of some biblical names. The article has dealt with ten names, which can be explained with the help of equivalent roots from the rich vocabulary of the Arabic language, assuming that the meanings had existed in the Hebrew language in the past, but for reasons often unknown to us, have been extinct.

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