

ETIOLOGIES IN THE BIBLE: EXPLICIT, DOUBLE, AND HIDDEN

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The story of biblical etiologies begins with the German scholar Herman Gunkel (1862 – 1932). In 1901, Gunkel published a commentary on Genesis in which he set forth his theories on etiology,¹ from the Greek root *aitiologia*, roughly translated as “to give a reason for.” Gunkel defined the word “aetiological” (its older spelling) to mean narratives “that are written for a purpose, or to explain something.”² He noted that “Ancient Israel spent much thought upon the origin and the real meaning of races, mountains, wells, sanctuaries, and cities.”³ Gunkel thus proceeded to show how much of Genesis is devoted to explaining the history of some of Israel’s most important institutions and customs. Indeed, Gunkel posited that the instinct for asking such “how things came to be” questions, and the desire to understand them, are innate in man. Ever since they were first identified by Gunkel, the study of etiologies has played a large role in the academic study of the Tanakh.⁴

While the origins of such study can be traced to the secular academy, it is of benefit to those espousing a more traditional approach as well. Knowledge and awareness of etiologies gives us a better understanding of Tanakh, and often reveals deep layers of meaning otherwise hidden.

At the outset, etiologies must be distinguished from a related, yet very much different concept, mentioned in TB *Berakhot* 7b known as *shema garim*, “the name causes it,” that a name causes character traits. In Genesis 27:36, for example, Esau exclaims that Jacob was called by that name because of his deceptions, *Isn't he rightly named Jacob? This is the second time he has taken advantage of me.* In I Samuel 25:25, Abigail explained to David that her husband was a vulgar man, just as his name implied, *For as his name is, so is he: Nabal is his name and churlishness is with him.* The Talmud also offers interpretations based on individual names and places.⁵

Such homiletical teachings are not the same as etiologies. The former seek to discern the character of a thing; the latter seek to explain its origins. An etiology comes to answer the fundamental question of why things are the way they are. A homiletical teaching comes after that point, and seems to be based

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on the premise that one's name contains a type of self-created prophecy, a destiny brought into reality by the power of suggestion inherent in a name. This is not the idea behind etiologies. Rather, they are another layer of meaning embedded in the text.⁶

In many cases the origins of a given name or place are made explicit and obvious. Many times such etiologies are prefaced or connected with phrases such as *al ken* (therefore) or *ad ha-yom ha-zeh* (to this very day). We learn that Noah (rest) was called by that name because his father Lamech expected him to bring respite (or: comfort) from toil (Genesis 5:29). In Genesis 35:8 we are told that the place where Deborah was buried was named Alon Bakhut ("oak of weeping"), because of the crying and mourning over the family nurse. Gilgal (rolling) received its name because of God's declaration there that *I have today rolled away the disgrace of Egypt* from the Israelites' failure to circumcise their children (Josh. 5:9). And in Judges 2:4 we are told that a place was called Bokhim (crying) because the people cried there when God gave them a harsh rebuke. See, for another example, Judges 7:25. We are told of the capture of two Midianite leaders named Oreb and Zev, men who are otherwise completely unknown. Nevertheless, we are told of this event, in the briefest of asides, because it furnishes us with an explanation of how the places Tzur Oreb and Yekav Zev received their names. While unknown to us today, the memory of the event was apparently well-known in ancient times, as it is cited in both Isaiah 10:26 and Psalms 83:12.⁷

However, there are occasions we seem to find two or more etiologies for the name of a person or location. For example, the origin of the city Be'er Sheva. The name can derive from the oath (*shvuah*) made there between Abraham and Abimelech, as stated in Genesis 21:31. But in 26:33 it is stated that Isaac gave it that name because it was the seventh (*sheva*) well that he had dug (see Seforno on that verse). The commentators, such as Ibn Ezra, seek ways to reconcile the verses, and they do not have to be seen as conflicting. Rashbam posits that they are simply two different localities.

The name of Isaac is another case of a double etiology. In Genesis 17:17, after being told by God that he would have a son, Abraham laughs to himself at the thought of elderly people like he and Sarah having a child. Only two verses later (17:19) God tells Abraham that he will have a son, and he shall name him Isaac (17:19). Now, Isaac, of course, comes from the root word

meaning "laughter". Thus, the connection of the command to Abraham's laughter seems clear.

However, later (18:12) in the encounter with the three visitors who announce the future birth of Isaac, Sarah overhears the prediction and laughs, leading to a remonstrance from Abraham. Perhaps it is this laughter, then, that is the etiological cause for the name. Moreover, in 21:6, immediately after Isaac is born, Sarah exclaims that anyone who hears of the birth will laugh in amazement at the news. It is thus unclear which episode of laughter underlies the name – Abraham's laughter before the birth; Sarah's laughter before the birth; Sarah's laughter after the birth; or some combination of them all. The Torah could be employing a deliberate literary device which uses the same action (laughter) to show how the birth of Isaac generated diverse and changing emotions.⁸

We also find multiple etiologies for the same expression. In I Samuel 10:12, we are told that the expression, "Is Saul also among the prophets?" derived from an incident where Saul began prophesying, right after he had been crowned king by Samuel. But a different background altogether is given much later in I Samuel 19:24. Saul once again begins prophesying, but this incident occurs after Saul's daughter Michal is married to David, and his battles with the latter have already begun. In both cases, we are explicitly told that the event in question led to the expression.

In some cases, the double etiology is less explicit. For example, the name Edom for Esau. The Torah tells us Esau, identified with Edom, was called by this name because of the incident in which he traded his birthright for *this red stuff* (Gen. 25:30). However, he was also described earlier in Genesis 25:25 as being born *admoni*, reddish, making his name Edom a double etiology to both his hair color and the bowl of pottage.⁹

Other examples of non-explicit double etiologies are found in the names of some of the tribes. The name Issachar implies some sort of reward or payment. Genesis 30:18 states, that Leah said, *God has rewarded me (sekhari) for giving my servant to my husband. So she named him Issachar*, meaning that Issachar was named such as a reward for Leah giving Zilpah to Jacob. However, in Genesis 30:16 we find that *When Jacob came in from the fields that evening, Leah went out to meet him. 'You must sleep with me,' she said. 'I have hired you (sekhartikha) with my son's mandrakes.'* The implication

here is that it was Leah's "payment" (of the *dudaim*) for Jacob that caused the name of the ensuing child to be named Issachar.¹⁰

In other cases two etiologies are implied as the naming takes place, which may indicate that the child's name is based on two different words. For example, regarding Zebulun, *Then Leah said, 'God has presented me with a precious gift (zibadani zebed tob). This time my husband will treat me with honor (yizbeleni) because I have borne him six sons.' So she named him Zebulun* (Gen. 30:20). These are two completely different statements, meaning "God has given me a gift" and "now my husband will exalt me." The root of the name can be understood as *zebul* or *zebed*, or possibly a play on both.

Similarly, with the naming of Joseph, Rachel said, *'God has taken away (assaf) my disgrace.'* She named him Joseph, and said, *'May the LORD add (Yosef) to me another son'* (Gen. 30:23). The source of the name is either that God had "gathered in" Rachel's shame, or because an "additional" son had been granted her, or a combination of the two.

None of these tribes have a single straightforward etiology found by the other brothers (Naphtali and Asher, possibly, excepted) and each seems to have a double etiology.¹¹

The area of Maḥanaim also presents us with what appears to be two different etiologies, even if not stated as such. On the one hand, Genesis 32:2 explicitly states that Jacob encountered angels in that location and, thinking the place to be in the camp of God, called it by that name, *When Jacob saw them, he said, 'This is the camp of God!'* So he named that place Maḥanaim. However if this was the source of the name, there would have been no need for Jacob to call the place by the plural – he should have just called it Maḥaneh. At the same time, an equally if not more plausible source appears just a few verses later. In Genesis 32:8 Jacob splits the family into two camps, reasoning that if one were attacked, the other would escape. As he remarks in Genesis 32:11, *'I have become two camps.'* The Torah does not tell us explicitly that this is source of the name Maḥanaim, but given the proximity of these two verses to the original etiology presented, we appear to have a case of two different etiologies for the same place.¹²

There are also cases where the etiology of a place is never explicitly stated at all, but rather implied or hinted to. Esau's territory was called Har Seir (Gen. 36:9). Though never stated explicitly, the name seems to be based on

the fact that Esau was an *ish seir*, as Jacob described him in Genesis 27:11. Har Seir was named for its most prominent citizen, Esau, the *ish seir*.¹³

The territory of Ishmael was known as Paran (Gen. 21:21). Though more hidden than in the case of Esau, this place may have also been named after its founder or most prominent citizen, Ishmael. In Genesis 16:12 Ishmael is described as *pera adam, a wild ass of a man*. This unusual appellation sounds very similar to Paran and may be connected to it.¹⁴

Another such hidden etiology concerns an example mentioned above, Gilgal. Gilgal (rolling) received its name because of God's declaration there that *I have today rolled away the disgrace of Egypt* from the Israelites' failure to circumcise their children (Josh. 5:9). However, later in Joshua we learn of another event that took place in Gilgal. Five kings the Israelites had been battling had fled, and were hiding in a cave in Makkeda. Joshua 10:18 tells us the instruction of Joshua, who was stationed in Gilgal, to guard the kings: *And Joshua said, 'Roll large rocks (golu avanim) up to the mouth of the cave, and post some men there to guard it.'* Joshua tells the men to roll rocks in front of the entrance. The narrative continues with a description of what happened to the kings, and concludes that the rocks they had rolled in front of the cave are still there to this day. This appears to be another subtle etiology to explain how a town perhaps called "Rolling Rock" got its name.

Other examples of hidden etiologies may be found, some more likely than others. In Judges 7:3 Gideon was directed to remove all "trembling" (*harod*) men from the army who would fight Midian. It is thus not by coincidence, and another hidden etiology, that the scene of this incident was in Ein *Harod*, "Spring of the Trembling" (Judg. 7:1).¹⁵ In II Samuel 21:6, the name of the place where the Gibeonites took revenge on Saul's children is called Givat Shaul, with no mention or designation as an etiology.

The story of Judah and Tamar may also contain a hidden etiology. Genesis 38:14 tells us that Tamar sat waiting for Judah in *Petah Einayim* (literally "eye-opening") disguised as a prostitute. This may be in reference to the fact that in the very same verse we are told that Tamar *covered her face with a veil*, presumably leaving only an opening for her eyes.¹⁶ In the battle between Jacob and the mysterious man, the name of the river where it occurred is casually mentioned, Yabbok (Gen. 32:23). It seems likely that it got this name because of the *ma'avak* (struggle) that occurred there. Likewise, without the

Torah telling us explicitly, the area of Kadesh (where Moses struck the rock) seems to have received its name from the fact that there God *affirmed his sanctity* (*va-yikdash*) (Num. 20:13), or because it was there that Moses and Aharon *did not trust Me enough to affirm My sanctity* (*lehakdisheni*) (Num. 20:12).¹⁷

We have seen how etiologies frequently appear in Tanakh. Many times they are identified explicitly. Sometimes two or more etiologies can be found for the same place, and it is up to the reader to understand how the two are related. And then there are cases where the etiology is there, waiting to be discovered, but yet not visible to a simple surface reading. An understanding of these etiologies helps us better understand Tanakh, and opens up new vistas for experiencing the many layers of the Torah.

NOTES

1. The book was published the same year in an English edition, and the lengthy prologue to that work was republished in 1964 under the title *The Legends of Genesis: The Biblical Saga & History* by Schocken Books, with an introduction by the noted scholar and archeologist William Albright.

2. Gunkel, at 25.

3. Gunkel, at 27.

4. The academic literature upon this topic is vast. See generally the *Anchor Bible Dictionary* (1992) Volume II at 838-841; *Oxford Dictionary of the Bible* (2009) at 121. In a more popular format, Dr. James Kugel, in *How to Read the Bible* (New York: 2007), also discusses Biblical etiology in many places.

5. This method is in keeping with the principle set forth in *Midrash Tanhuma* (Exodus 35:1) "A man is called by three names: the name his parents give him; the name others call him; and the name he acquires for himself." The parallel Latin term for *shema garim* interpretations is "*No-men est Omen*".

6. In recent decades, a rich literature has sprung up around such name *drashot*, collecting the various Rabbinic interpretations of names and places in Tanakh, and often adding to it. The literature was given the full scholarly treatment by Professor Moshe Garsiel of Bar Ilan University in his book *Medrashei Shemot Ba-Mikra* (Ramat Gan: 1988). There is also some criticism of Professor Garsiel's work, and indeed, some of the interpretations in the literature seem, at least to this writer, rather forced. See, for example, Shmarya Gershuni's work *Medrashei Shemot B'Sefer Shoftim*. It is Gershuni who speaks of such interpretations as the poetry of Tanakh. I am indebted to Professor Shnayer Leiman for referring me to this literature.

7. The name of Babel furnishes us an interesting example. Genesis 11:9 states that this country/region got its name because it was there that God confused (*Balal*) the languages. Yet ancient Akkadian sources say the meaning of the word is *Bab-El* ("Gateway to the Lord"). According to the *Da'at Mikrah* commentary of Mossad Harav Kook, the Torah gives us the original meaning, while the later Akkadian inhabitants gave it a more positive meaning. R.D.Z. Hoffman also notes

this in his commentary, remarking that the actual etymology of the word makes no difference, as the point of the Torah is simply to remind Israel that the dispersion of the peoples was of divine origin, not simply historical happenstance.

8. Interestingly, in at least two other occasions we also find the word *mitzahek* closely associated with Isaac. Genesis 21:9, immediately after Isaac's birth, tells us that his brother Ishmael was *mitzahek*, engaging in some form of sport or mockery. Later, in Genesis 26:8, Abimelech sees Isaac *mitzahek* ("jesting") with Rebecca. This is a fairly uncommon word, not found in connection with the other two patriarchs. The connection to Isaac's name is unmistakable. Since these incidents occurred after Isaac's birth, one would have to invoke the principle of the sages, paraphrased by Rashi to Genesis 10:25, that by prophetic inspiration, someone may be called a name because of an event yet to happen in the future.

9. Cf. the description of David in I Samuel 16:12 as *admoni*, traditionally understood to mean "red-haired." The two etiologies of Edom can also be interpreted in another way. Perhaps after Esau was born with red hair and a ruddy complexion, people naturally referred to him as Edom ("Red") as a kind of nick-name. Then, after the incident of the red pottage became known, people may have made the connection retrospectively, along the lines of "*now* I know why they call him Red!" Moreover, Hizkuni has an entirely different understanding of the word "Edom", translating the word not as "red", but as "manly", in the sense that Esau was born with so much hair, as to make him appear older and more man-like than other babies.

10. According to Rashbam and Da'at Zekeneim M-Ba'alei Tosfot, both meanings are intended. The latter adds that the double letter *sin* in the name is intended to cover both meanings, but because one of them is somewhat undignified (*gnai*) only one of the letters are actually pronounced.

11. TB *Berakhot* 7b proposes an original double etiology of its own for Reuben. Genesis (29:32) states that Reuben (from the root word "to see") was given this name by Leah because God had seen her suffering. However, R. Elazar provides a different reason altogether, explaining that Leah wanted God to "see" the difference between her son and Esau (i.e., she saw prophetically that Reuben would peaceably surrender his birthright, while Esau hated Jacob for taking it from him.) The Vilna Gaon, in *Kol Eliyahu*, makes the keen textual observation that Reuben was named first, and the explanation given afterwards; whereas with the other brothers, the explanation provided first, and only then the name. According to him, this anomaly suggested to R. Elazar that there must have been a secondary explanation for the name.

12. See the outstanding *Parshablog* website of Rabbi Josh Waxman for more on this issue. Rabbi Waxman also discusses several other examples of what he calls "dual etymologies". I am grateful for his review of this essay and his many insightful suggestions.

13. In his forthcoming edition of R. Abraham ben Ha-Rambam's commentary on the Torah (Genesis 35:4, fn.2), R. Moshe Maimon suggests that the area of Seir may have been named for Seir the Horite mentioned in Genesis (36:20) and alluded to in Deuteronomy (2:12). That is possible; however, Seir's family intermarried with Esau, and the area became identified exclusively with Esau, while the Horites eventually vanished. It is also possible that the name Seir was only given to this warrior at a later date, long after he had died. In any event, the etymology still operates to explain how the area came to be identified with Esau.

14. After writing this I saw the *Da'at Mikrah* also makes a brief tentative connection between the unusual phrase *pera adam* and Ishmael's hometown of *Paran*.

15. Subsequently I saw this noted by Garsiel (*Loc. cit.* at 126) as well. Somewhat more tentatively, one may also posit a hidden etiology in II Samuel 17:17. In this passage, two spies, Jonathan and Ahimaz, were sent by Hushai to warn David of an attack planned by Ahitofel as part of the Absalom rebellion. The verse says the men were staying in Ein Rogel, which can be translated as “Spring of the Spies.” However, unlike the case of Ein Harod, Ein Rogel is mentioned elsewhere in Tanakh too, and is not exclusively tied to this incident. In addition, the men were acting more in the capacity of informants than spies. Still, this may indeed also be another hidden etiology.

16. See Rashi to Isaiah 3:19, defining *ra'al* as a garment which covers the whole face except for the eyes.

17. I would like to thank R. Josh Waxman, R. Moshe Maimon, and Rabbi Moshe Berger who each reviewed this essay and shared with me valuable thoughts and references. In particular, I must stand up and acknowledge the assistance of Dr. Shnayer Leiman, who also reviewed this essay and provided much valuable information. I know I am speaking for others as well as myself when I say his influence on this work, and everything I have ever written, is inestimable.



עשה תורתך קבע

THE TRIENNIAL BIBLE READING CALENDAR

DEDICATED TO THE MEMORY OF CHAIM ABRAMOWITZ

October	II Samuel	21 – 24
	I Kings	1 – 22
	II Kings	1 – 2
November	II Kings	3 – 25
	Isaiah	1 – 6
December	Isaiah	7 – 35
January	Isaiah	36 – 64
February	Isaiah	65 – 66
	Jeremiah	1 – 26

