THEOPHORIC NAMES IN THE BIBLE

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According to the Greek English Lexicon,1 the meaning of the Greek word "theophoros" is "bearing or carrying a god"; theophoric "nomata" are "names derived from a god." In our discussion here about theophoric names in the Bible, we allude to names built using the two Hebrew denominations of God: Elohim and the Tetragrammaton (hereafter, "the Lord" in our translation). Neither is taken fully, with all their letters, in the building of a biblical theophoric name.

With Elohim [אֱלֹהִים], most names take only the first two letters, often as the beginning of the name (Elkanah, Elkhanan, Eliezer, Eliah, Elyakim), or at the end (Gabriel, Nethanel, Daniel, Raphael, Israel).

With the Tetragrammaton, some theophoric names begin with the first two consonants, followed by the vowel "o" (Yehoshua, Yehoram, Yehoyakim, Yehoshafat, Yehonathan) or the vowel "u" (as in Yehudah). Other names conclude with those two consonants and the vowel "u" (Yeshayahu, Yirmiya-hu, Eliyahu, Nethanyahu, Matityahu).

Other names take only the first and the third letters from the Tetragrammaton and build them into the syllable "yo" at the beginning of a name (Yoab, Yoram, Yoyakim, Yoel, Yonathan). Still others conclude with the first two letters of the Tetragrammaton (Nethanyah, Hiskiyah, Yeshayah, Gedalyah, Aviyah). Sometimes, only one letter is taken, as when God Himself added the letter "h" to change Avram to Avraham and Sarai to Sarah (Gen. 17:5, 15).

Another example of retaining only one letter of the Tetragrammaton is the Hebrew name Yeshu [יְשוּ], rendered into Greek as "Jesus." This is a short form of Yeshua [יְשׁוּ] that is itself a short form of Yehoshua [יְהוֹשֻׁעְ],

Up to this point, we have dealt with the ways of constructing theophoric names. Now, we ask why Israelite fathers and mothers introduced allusions to God in the names they gave to their children, and what they meant by the allusion.

There were parents who wanted to express their thanks to God for giving them this newborn son. So they took the Hebrew root תָּנָנ (n-t-n - "give")
and built it into theophoric names such as נתנאל (Nethanel (Num. 1:8)); יהונתן (Yehonathan (I Sam. 14:6)) and the short form יונתן (Yonathan (I Sam. 13:2)); נתןיהו (Nethanyahu (Jer. 36:14)); and יונתן (Elnatan (II Kg. 24:8)). All these names express the idea that the Lord has "given" this son to his parents.

An analogous thought moved Leah, the wife of Jacob, to call her fourth son by the name יהודה (Yehudah). This name merges י-ו-ה- [the first three letters of the Tetragrammaton] with a derivative of יד-ה – "thank"), of which the first letter became a "vav" and merged with the "vav" of the Tetragrammaton. Leah herself explains the meaning of this name: And she said: 'Now I will thank the Lord'; therefore she called his name Yehudah (Gen. 29:35).

There are names that take the root נ-ח [h-n-n -- "grace," "favor" or "bestow a grace"], expressing that God has given this son by His grace, or wishing that He may favor this child in the future. Such ideas underlie theophoric names such as אלחנן (Elhanan (II Sam. 21:19)); חננאל (Hananel, after whom a tower in Jerusalem was named (Jer. 31:37)); חנניהו (Hananyahu (Jer. 36:12)) and the short form חנניה (Hananyah (Jer. 28:1); יהוחנן [Yehohanan (Ezra 10:6)] and the short form יהון (Yohanan (Jer. 40:16)).

There are theophoric names that combine the two Hebrew names of the Divinity, אל [El] and the Tetragrammaton, to denote "The Lord is God" (or "my God"). Among these are יחזקאל [Yehezkel – Ezekiel] denotes the wish אל-יחזק [Yehazek-El], "May God strengthen [him]." The name of the prophet ירמיהו [Yirmiyahu – Jeremiah], and the short form ירמיה [Yirmiyah (Jer. 27:1)] means "May the Lord rouse [him]."

There are theophoric names denote that God is אבי [avi – "my Father"]. For example, אבי [Aviel (I Sam. 9:1)]; אבי [Aviyahu (II Chron. 13:20)] and the short form אבי [Aviyah (I Sam. 8:2)]; and יואב [Yoav (I Sam. 30:30)].
Others use the root יָשָע [y-sh-a – "help," "salvation"], that mean "God is the Savior," or express the wish "[May] God or the Lord help or save." Among these are ישוע [Elisha (I Kg. 19:16)]; ישוע [Yeshayahu (Isaiah)] and the short form ישוע [Yeshaya (Ezra 8:7)]; ישועה [Yehoshua] and ישוע [Hoshea], the letter "yod" became "vav."

After the destruction of the First Temple and the exile to Babylon (586 BCE), Jewish parents expressed their hope that God may ישיב [yashiv – "bring back"] His people to their homeland by giving their children such names as ישיב [Yehoram (I Kg. 22:51)]; ישיב [Yoram (II Sam. 8:10)]. He is ידוע [gadol – "great"], as in ידוע [Gedalyah (Jer. 40:5)]. The name ישוע [Gavriel (Dan. 8:16)] may mean "God is my fortress." The name יָבוֹש [Daniel] refers to God as being "the Judge" or "doing justice." The name יָבוֹש [Raphael (I Chron. 26:7)], that merges the "aleph" in "גָּבֹל" and in "רָפָא" [r-f-a – "heal" "cure"], connotes that "God heals" or expresses the wish that "God will heal" – perhaps some illness of the child.

The root יָזַר [a-z-r, e-z-r – "help"] may express thanks to Him for His help in getting this son, or for other favors received from Him. Or, it may express a hope that God will help this child in the future. Among these names are יזרא [Elazar (Ex. 6:23)]; יזרא [Eziezer (Gen. 15:2)]; יזרא [Azaryahu (I Kg. 4:2)]; and יזרא [Azriel (Jer. 36:26)] and the short form יזרא [Azre’el (Ezra 10:41)].

There are few examples in the Bible of theophoric names given to daughters. One of them may be יוכבד [Yokheved (Ex. 6:20)], where "דב" perhaps derives from "דב" [khavod – "glory"] to form a name meaning "Glory to the Lord." Another feminine theophoric name is יָלוֹא [Athaliah – II Kg. 11:1)] which might mean יָלוֹא ["Time for the Lord"]. This same name Athalyah is also used for men (Ezra 8:7, I Chron. 1:26).

Most theophoric names were given by the father or the mother, or both, to a newborn baby. However, sometimes a person’s name was changed. The successor of Moses was originally called Hoshea [Hoshea], in itself a theophoric name and held by a later prophet. But Moses added the first letter of the Tetragrammaton and called him by the name יהושע [Yehoshua (Num. 13:16)]. There are kings in the Bible who were given new names when they came to
the throne. For example, when 
Elyakim [Elyakim] was made King of Judah
by the Pharaoh Nekho, his name was changed to
Yehoyakim (II Kg, 23:34), both of them theophoric names.

The most famous of all theophoric names is Yisrael. It combines
El with the a future tense of the verb "s-r-h – "contend" "fight").
The Bible gives its own explanation of this name, bestowed by an angel of
God on the patriarch Jacob when he was already a mature man with four
wives and a dozen children: 'Your name shall be called no more Jacob, but
Israel; because you have contended with God and with men, and you have
prevailed' (Gen. 32:29).

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