

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, Yirmiyahu, 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 [יֵשׁוּ], rendered into Greek as "Jesus." This is a short form of Yeshua [יְהוֹשֻׁעַ] that is itself a short form of Yehoshua [יְהוֹשֻׁעַ].

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 יתן [n-t-n – "give"]

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and built it into theophoric names such as נְתַנְאֵל [Nethanel (Num. 1:8)]; יְהוֹנָתָן [Yehonathan (I Sam. 14:6)] and the short form יוֹנָתָן [Yonathan (I Sam. 13:2)]; נְתַנְיָהוּ [Nethanyahu (Jer. 36:14)]; and אֶלְנָתָן [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 יְהוּדָה [Yehudah]. This name merges יהיה-ה [the first three letters of the Tetragrammaton] with a derivative of יהי [y-d-h – "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 ה-נ-ן [*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 אֶלְחָנָן [Elhanan (II Sam. 21:19)]; חָנָנִאל [Hananel, after whom a tower in Jerusalem was named (Jer. 31:37)]; חָנָנִיָּהוּ [Hananyahu (Jer. 36:12)] and the short form חָנָנִיָּה [Hananyah (Jer. 28:1)]; יְהוֹחָנָן [Yehohanan (Ezra 10:6)] and the short form יוֹחָנָן [Yohanan (Jer. 40:16)].

There are theophoric names that combine the two Hebrew names of the Divinity, אֵל [El] and the Tetragrammaton, to denote "The Lord is God" (or "my God"). Among these are אֵלִיָּהוּ [Eliyahu (I Kg. 17:1) and its short form אֵלִיָּה [Elijah (II Kg. 1:3)]; the name of the prophet יוֹאֵל [Yoel]; and the assertive name אֵלֵּל [Eliel – "my God is God" (I Chron. 6:19)].

Other names point to the parents' hopes for the future of their son. The verb יָקַם [*yakim* – "raise"] conveys the thought "[May] God raise [this son]," as in אֵלְיָקִים [Elyakim (II Kg. 18:18)]; יְהוֹיָקִים [Yehoyakim (II Kg. 23:34)] and the short form יוֹיָקִים [Yoyakim (Neh. 12:10)]. The verb יָכַח [*yakhin*] conveys the thought "[May] the Lord fortify [this son]." We find this in the names יְהוֹיָכִיחַ [Yehoyakhin (II Kg. 24:6)] and the short form יוֹיָכִיחַ [Yoyakhin (Ezek. 1:2)]. The name of the prophet יְהֵזְקֵל [Yehezkel – Ezekiel] denotes the wish יְחַזְקֵל [Yehazek-El], "May God strengthen [him]." The name of the prophet יִרְמְיָהוּ [Yirmiyahu – Jeremiah], and the short form יִרְמְיָה [Yirmiyah (Jer. 27:1)] means "May the Lord rouse [him]."

There are theophoric names denote that God is אָבִי [*avi* – "my Father"]. For example, אֲבִיָּאל [Aviel (I Sam. 9:1)]; אֲבִיָּהוּ [Aviyahu (II Chron. 13:20)] and the short form אֲבִיָּה [Aviyah (I Sam. 8:2)]; and יוֹאָב [Yoav (I Sam.

26:6)]. Others use the root עִשָּׂה [*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 עִשָּׂהֵל [Elisha (I Kg. 19:16)]; יְשַׁעְיָהוּ [Yeshayahu (Isaiah)] and the short form יְשַׁעְיָה [Yeshayah (Ezra 8:7)] In יְהוֹשֻׁעַ [Yeho-shua] and הוֹשֵׁעַ [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 יָשִׁיב [*yashiv* – "bring back"] His people to their homeland by giving their children such names as עִלְיָשִׁיב [Elyashiv (Ezra 10:6)].

Theophoric names may tell us something about God Himself: He is רָם [*ram* – "high"], as in יְהוֹרָם [Yehoram (I Kg. 22:51)] and the short form יֹרָם [Yoram (II Sam. 8:10)]. He is גָּדוֹל [*gadol* – "great"], as in גְּדַלְיָהוּ [Gedalyah (Jer. 40:5)]. The name גַּבְרִיֵּאל [Gavriel (Dan. 8:16)] may mean "God is my fortress." The name דָּנְיֵאל [Daniel] refers to God as being "the Judge" or "doing justice." The name רַפָּאֵל [Raphael (I Chron. 26:7)], that merges the "*aleph*" in "*לֵא*" and in "*רפא*" [*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 עִזְרָה [*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 אֵלְעָזָר [Elazar (Ex. 6:23)]; אֵלְעִזֶּר [Eliezer (Gen. 15:2)]; עֲזַרְיָהוּ [Azaryahu (I Kg. 4:2)] and the short form עֲזַרְיָה [Azaryah (II Kg. 14:21)]; and עֲזַרְיֵאל [Azriel (Jer. 36:26)] and the short form עֲזַרְיֵאל [Azre'el (Ezra 10:41)].

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

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 הוֹשֵׁעַ [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 יְהוֹשֻׁעַ [Yehoshua (Num. 13:16)]. There are kings in the Bible who were given new names when they came to

the throne. For example, when **אֱלִיָּאִים** [Elyakim] was made King of Judah by the Pharaoh Nekho, his name was changed to **יְהוֹיָאִים** [Yehoyakim (II Kg, 23:34), both of them theophoric names.

The most famous of all theophoric names is **יִשְׂרָאֵל** [Yisrael]. It combines **אֵל** [El] with the a future tense of the verb **סָרַח** [*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).

NOTES

1. H. G. Liddel and R. Scott, *Greek-English Lexicon*, 9th ed. (Oxford: 1953).

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