

Frank W. Nelte

BIBLE NAMES AND THEIR MEANINGS

by Frank W. Nelte

I felt it would be useful to have a list of all the names that are used in the Bible and their meanings, together with a Scripture reference for where each of those names is used in the Bible. So I started out with Hitchcock's Bible Names, intending to look up a Scripture reference for every name in his list. It very quickly became apparent to me that the majority of the meanings Hitchcock has assigned to the names in his list are very questionable, with very many being clearly incorrect.

I myself have for many years relied primarily on Gesenius' Hebrew-Chaldee Lexicon to the Old Testament by H.W.F. Gesenius for the meanings of Hebrew words in the Old Testament. Gesenius was a highly qualified and respected professor and authority in oriental literature, who had also undertaken very meticulous lexicographical labours in the Hebrew language. He produced his first Hebrew-German Dictionary for the Old Testament in 1810-1812. Professor Gesenius died 30 years later, in 1842, by which time he had produced his Hebrew-Chaldee Lexicon to the Old Testament.

Samuel Prideaux Tregelles, a contemporary to Gesenius, wrote the Preface for the English translation that was published in 1846, and when a new impression of the translation was published in 1857, Tregelles wrote an additional short preface entitled "TO THE STUDENT". Tregelles' comments in these short prefaces help somewhat to explain why we today can find vastly divergent meanings attached to the same Hebrew word by different reference works.

Before examining some of the statements Tregelles made almost 150 years ago now, let's back up a little bit. When I myself started the study of Latin in my first year of high school back in 1958, the very first thing our Latin teacher explained was that "Latin is a dead language", meaning that today Latin is not the everyday spoken language of any nation on earth, and it has not been the spoken language of any nation for well over 1000 years.

When it comes to the study of the Hebrew Old Testament Scriptures, then this statement is, if anything, even more true for the Hebrew language. When the Jews had returned to Palestine from the Babylonian captivity they had adopted the Aramaic language. Portions of the books of Daniel and Ezra were written in the Aramaic language. Ezra wrote in the fifth century B.C.

Five hundred years later, during the ministry of Jesus Christ and of the original apostles, Aramaic was the main everyday language of the Jews in Palestine. Hebrew was no longer the spoken language. Jesus Christ conducted His whole ministry in the Aramaic language. By then Hebrew was only the language of religion. An analogy might help to clarify this somewhat.

Fifty years ago and more Catholics in English-speaking countries around the world obviously had English as their main language. English was their mother tongue. Yet the religious services in their church (i.e. Catholic Mass, etc.) were conducted in Latin. The services were conducted in a language that the people themselves did not speak. However, even though the vast majority of Catholics in English-speaking countries do not really speak Latin, yet the constant exposure to certain Latin words and expressions means that many Catholics have come to understand the meanings of those Latin words and expressions. In a religious context they can identify the meanings of specific terms. But the situation was one of the religious services in the Catholic Church being conducted in a language different

from the one that the people who attended those services were actually speaking as their normal language.

One hundred years ago we had a very similar situation here in South Africa. The first Dutch pioneers who had trekked into the interior had taken the Dutch language Bible with them. But in the course of the 150 years before 1900 the spoken language amongst the white settlers in the Cape had been modified and altered considerably from the Dutch that is spoken in Holland. By 1900 the "Afrikaners" (white settlers of primarily Dutch and German descent) no longer spoke Dutch. They now spoke a new language called Afrikaans, which, while it has many words that are the same or very similar to words in Dutch, also has many words that are quite different from Dutch. The pronunciation of words in Afrikaans is also different from the way those words are pronounced in Dutch. So 100 years ago many religious Afrikaners would have daily Bible readings for the family. But there was no Bible translation into the Afrikaans language available. So in these families the father would read to his family from the Dutch language Bible, and then elaborate and explain in Afrikaans what he had just read in Dutch. Whether he pronounced the words in the Dutch text as someone from Holland would pronounce those words or not was immaterial. Everyone was generally still familiar enough with the Dutch BIBLICAL vocabulary to grasp the general meaning of the Dutch text that had been read. But the situation was one of a Bible reading being conducted in a language different from the language that those listening were speaking as their normal language.

Now back in the time of Christ's ministry the situation for the Jews was also somewhat like this. The Jews spoke Aramaic. The study of the Hebrew language was the reserve of those who devoted themselves to the study of the Scriptures, primarily the Pharisees and the Sadducees. Three hundred years later, at the time of Hillel II, Hebrew had not been the spoken language for many centuries. For most Jewish people familiarity with Hebrew was restricted to what was presented in religious services, like a Catholic's familiarity with Latin.

Since the original Hebrew scrolls did not contain vowel pointings, and since Hebrew had not been a spoken language for many centuries, the meanings of some words in the Hebrew text became a matter of speculation. By attaching different vowels to the same sequence of consonants completely different meanings could be arrived at.

When we examine the meanings attached to certain biblical names it becomes quite clear that some of the meanings we are NOW given were in fact only attached to those names AFTER CERTAIN EVENTS. Because a certain person did certain things in his or her life, therefore a specific meaning was attached to their name.

For example:

It seems ridiculous to assume that king Ethbaal of the Zidonians (see 1 Kings 16:31) decided to give his daughter a name that means "UNCHASTE" and "IMMODEST" when he named his daughter "Jezebel". And so Gesenius correctly states that Jezebel means "WITHOUT cohabitation, chaste, modest". As it turned out, Jezebel was the very opposite of what her name actually means. And so TODAY we find the meaning of "UNCHASTE", etc. attached to this name "Jezebel". And the use of the name "Jezebel" in Revelation 2:20 makes quite clear that this later meaning of the name "Jezebel" is in fact the correct one to apply to New Testament uses of this name.

There are many other biblical names where reference works will give meanings that clearly reflect what that person did in his or her lifetime, rather than the meaning that name may have had before such conduct or actions were recorded. So we find many instances where people have tried to establish the meaning of a name not by examining the etymology of that name, but by trying to fit certain characteristics from that person's life into the meaning of their name (e.g. Jezebel meaning unchaste). At

times that may be quite correct (as applying the later meaning of Jezebel to Revelation 2:20), while at other times this may be somewhat questionable. At other times two names that are spelled differently in Hebrew are both transliterated into English as if they were the same, for example the names "Mesha" and "Sabeans". They may in fact have different meanings.

The result of all this is that there are reference books that will state rather contradictory meanings for the same biblical name. That is something we should be aware of when we examine a list like the one I have prepared here.

Also we should recognize that in the vast majority of cases the meaning of a name did not in any way reflect on the person with that name. For example, the name "Mary" is the same as the name "Miriam", and this name means "rebellion". It should be quite clear that the meaning of this name in no way reflected on the Mary who was the wife of Joseph, and the mother of Jesus. So we need to be cautious in wanting to attach the meaning of a specific name to the character or personality of the person with that name. At times the meaning may be very fitting, while at other times the meaning may not be appropriate at all (as with Mary).

When God created Adam and Eve, God did not give any instructions as to how they were to name their children. God left the naming totally up to human beings themselves. It is the rare exception where God either changed someone's name (e.g. Jacob to Israel) or instructed the parents as to the name they should give to their child (e.g. for John the Baptist). For the vast majority of names that were chosen God was not involved one way or the other. And in most cases those names reflected nothing more than wishful thinking.

In Genesis 4:26 we are told that already at that time people started to incorporate the name of God into their own names, to express a desired relationship with God. The expression "then began men to call upon the name of the LORD" really means that "then began men to call THEMSELVES by the name of the LORD", by starting to incorporate the name of God into their own names. Somebody made a start and set a precedent, and that opened the floodgates ... and in this list we can see the staggering number of names that in some way incorporate one or other of God's names into the name of a person or of a people. There is no guarantee that people actually lived up to the meanings embodied in their names.

Now let's look at what S.P. Tregelles wrote back in 1857 in his preface to Gesenius' Lexicon, entitled "TO THE STUDENT". He wrote:

"The mode in which some have introduced difficulties into the department of Hebrew Philology, has been BY ASSIGNING NEW AND STRANGE MEANINGS TO HEBREW WORDS, -- by affirming that such meanings MUST be right in particular passages (although no where else), and BY LIMITING THE SENSE OF A ROOT OR A TERM, so as to imply that some incorrectness of statement is found on the part of the Sacred writers." (my emphasis, page XIV of the Baker Book House soft cover edition of Gesenius)

On the next page Tregelles wrote:

"Sound Hebrew Philology will, then, often hinder difficulties from being introduced into the text of Scripture, and will guard us against the supposition that the writers of the Old Testament introduced STRANGE AND INCONGRUOUS THINGS incompatible with true inspiration ..." (my emphasis, page XV, *ibid*)

The reason Tregelles wrote this is because already 150 years ago some people had introduced "new

and strange meanings" for some of the Hebrew words found in the text of the Old Testament. It should therefore not surprise us that today we can find reference works which assign meanings to specific Hebrew words that are in clear conflict with the meanings attached to those same words by other reference works. Hitchcock appears to have in many cases relied on such works that "assigned new and strange meanings to Hebrew words"?

However, we should also note one other point. The reason why some people were able to introduce "new and strange meanings to Hebrew words" back in the 1850's is precisely because by that time HEBREW WAS A DEAD LANGUAGE. It had not been the spoken daily language of any people for over two millennia. For that entire period of time the Hebrew language had been the exclusive domain of scholars, without the language actually being in daily use by any people anywhere on earth, Jews or otherwise.

And if the modern State of Israel had not made the decision in 1948 to reinstate Hebrew as the official language of the State of Israel, then Hebrew would still be a dead language today. It was the modern State of Israel that in 1948 "resurrected" the Hebrew language, so that today Hebrew is once again one of the languages that is spoken on a daily basis in Israel. But that does not mean that the Hebrew of today is the same as the Hebrew of the Old Testament. It is not. Today's Hebrew is no more the same Hebrew as is today's English the same as the English of Shakespeare, or even of the time before Shakespeare. And because biblical Hebrew had no vowel pointings, such differences are undoubtedly compounded. And so even 150 years ago some Hebrew scholars introduced "new and strange meanings" for certain Hebrew words. It was people who carefully studied the Hebrew language, and not people who knew nothing about Hebrew, that introduced "strange and new meanings" as a result of some of their studies. This we should be aware of.

Another thing we should be aware of is this:

150 years ago the Jewish scholar Gesenius wrote in both, German and Latin. Dr. Gesenius was highly qualified and conversant with many different languages. But a careful study of his Hebrew-Chaldee Lexicon to the Old Testament will reveal that, in establishing the meanings for a number of Hebrew words, Dr. Gesenius actually appealed to the Latin Vulgate translation of the Scriptures. In other words, in some cases Gesenius appealed to meanings that Jerome had applied to certain Hebrew words when he (Jerome) translated those words into Latin. So in some cases Gesenius established the meaning of Hebrew words, not by appealing to knowledge the Jewish people themselves had preserved about the Hebrew language, but by appealing to information preserved by Latin speaking Catholic theologians.

[Comment: As an aside, the only source for claiming that the Hebrew name "YHVH" or "YHWH" was supposedly pronounced as "Yahveh" or as "Yahweh" is based on statements made by Catholic theologians. In their assertions for these pronunciations the Jewish scholars themselves are always forced to appeal to the testimony of these Catholic theologians, as the Jews themselves did not preserve the pronunciation of the name "YHVH". Irrespective of whether the pronunciation "Yahweh" (or "Yahveh") is correct or not, the point is that any appeal to this being the correct pronunciation is always dependent on appeals to records preserved by Catholic theologians, and not by Jewish scholars, simply because for so many centuries Hebrew was indeed a dead language.]

Now the reason why Dr. Gesenius had to make such occasional appeals to how Jerome understood certain Hebrew words is precisely because Hebrew at the time of Gesenius was a dead language. It was not possible for him to appeal to "spoken usages" in any of his definitions, because nobody on earth (150 years ago) was speaking Hebrew to communicate with his neighbours. And because Hebrew was a dead language, therefore it was possible for some Hebrew scholars to conclude that certain Hebrew words have vastly different meanings from those attached to those same words by other Hebrew scholars.

There are also cases where there is no record at all available to clearly show us what root word a name may have been derived from. So there are genuine cases where it is possible to assign vastly different meanings to a name. This is something we should expect when we are dealing with a language that was "dead" (not the everyday spoken language of any people) for over 2000 years, that there will be instances when it is possible to appeal to totally different derivations for a name.

Let me give you one example to illustrate this.

THE NAME "AARON"

In Hebrew the name Aaron consists of FIVE LETTERS. The five letters in their correct sequence are: ALEPH (A) HE (H) RESH (R) VAV (V or O) NUN (N). To keep this simple, let's just say that the Hebrew letters for the name Aaron are "AHRON". Now Hebrew scholars have no records to guide them as to how this name "AHRON" was formed. Therefore they have come up with TWO POSSIBILITIES. Either this name was formed from a root consisting of the LAST 4 LETTERS (i.e. "HRON"), or this name was formed from a root consisting of the FIRST 3 LETTERS (i.e. "AHR").

Now the letters "HR" mean "a mountain", and the letters "HRON" thus mean "a mountaineer". Therefore those scholars who follow this line of reasoning will state that the name "Aaron" means something like "mountainous" or "mountain man".

On the other hand, the letters "AHR" mean "enlightened". Therefore those scholars who follow this line of reasoning will state that the name "Aaron" means "lightbringer".

Both of these meanings (i.e. "lightbringer" or "mountain man") are theoretically possible for the name "Aaron". This brings us to what Tregelles referred to as some people introducing "strange and incongruous things" into the supposed meanings of Hebrew words. When Aaron was born, his parents were in slavery to the Egyptians. Aaron was born very shortly before the Egyptian Pharaoh instructed all Israelite male babies to be killed. The Israelites were far away from any mountains. They had lived all their lives up to that point in time in lower Egypt, in the Nile delta area.

Aaron's father's name "Amram" basically means "people of God" and Aaron's mother's name "Jochebed" basically means "God is our glory". Both of their names focus on a relationship with God.

So in those circumstances of slavery, and living in a flat environment, WHAT MEANING WERE HIS PARENTS THINKING OF, when they named their son "Aaron"? Would they have been thinking of "mountainous", "mountaineer", "mountain man"? Or would they have been thinking of "LIGHTBRINGER", someone who would help to alleviate the conditions of slavery they had to endure, by bringing some "light" or hope into their lives? "Lightbringer" implies help and intervention from God. "Mountainous", on the other hand, seems so totally out of place.

Furthermore, in 2 Peter 1:19 the Apostle Peter very clearly called Jesus Christ "Lightbringer" (or "Phosphoros" in Greek). In Hebrews 4:14 the Apostle Paul called Jesus Christ "a great High Priest". So the "great High Priest" is clearly "a Lightbringer". A few verses later, in Hebrews chapter 4, the Apostle Paul clearly compared Jesus Christ's role as High Priest to the role of Aaron. So there are parallels between Jesus Christ and Aaron.

When we consider all these things, and the circumstances under which Aaron was born, then I believe the correct meaning of Aaron's name has to be "lightbringer" rather than "mountainous".

The Latin name "Lucifer" and the Greek name "Phosphoros" and the Hebrew name "Aaron" all mean exactly the same thing, Lightbringer.

Anyway, the example of Aaron's name should help to illustrate why in some cases different reference works will state vastly different meanings for the same Hebrew name.

In preparing the list of biblical names below I have done the following:

1) For every name listed by Hitchcock I have looked up a Scripture reference. Many names appear only once in the whole Bible. For those names that appear two or more times I have generally listed the first occurrence for that name. By "first" I mean first in the sequence in which the books of the Old Testament appear in our English language editions of the Bible, which is not necessarily the same as first chronologically.

2) Then I added as many of the names that Hitchcock had omitted from his list as I could find. So far this list has approximately 1000 more entries than the list Hitchcock prepared. No doubt there are still some names that I have overlooked, which I intend to add to this list as they are brought to my attention. For this list of names the King James Version (KJV), also known as the Authorized Version (AV), has been used as the foundation. However, there are some additional biblical names that appear in other translations like the American Standard Version (ASV), the Revised Standard Version (RSV), the translation of the Jewish Publication Society (JPS), etc., but which names do not appear in the KJV. Where such names have come to my attention I have also included them in this list. Eventually I would like to have ALL the biblical names that appear in the major English language editions of the Bible included in this list.

[Comment: The Catholic 1899 Douay Rheims translation is based on the text of the Latin Vulgate version. As a translation from the Latin it has lost the Jewishness of very many names, by giving them a Latin flavour. For that reason I have excluded the vast majority of the spelling variations that are found in that version, with only the very occasional reference to the Douay version.]

I have also dropped all the names Hitchcock listed, but which are not found in any of the translations I have checked. In some cases those names represented spelling mistakes by Hitchcock, as when he transposed two letters in a name. In other cases those names were based on obsolete spelling forms not found in any of our translations today.

3) Then I examined the meaning of every single name in various reference works, and compared that to the definitions Hitchcock provided for his list of names. At a guess I would say that I felt it necessary to change in the region of 70% of all the definitions Hitchcock had provided. For the Hebrew names I relied primarily on Gesenius' Lexicon, as well as referring to other dictionaries where I felt it necessary to do so. For the Greek names I relied primarily on Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament by Joseph H. Thayer, which is also well over 100 years old. I also frequently consulted Smith's Revised Bible Dictionary, Strong's dictionaries and the dictionaries included with the Online Bible, which themselves are based on condensed versions of Gesenius and Thayer's.

4) Where the same name is in our English Bibles spelled in two or more different ways, I have included each form in its appropriate alphabetical location in the lists. The translators were faced with the task of transliterating names from the Hebrew alphabet into our alphabet, and they did not always transliterate the same Hebrew name in the same way. Thus for many Hebrew names there are two or even three and four different spelling forms in our English text. The frequency of such multiple forms for one Hebrew name illustrates the difficulty in always trying to attain a precise transliteration into a different language which employs a totally different alphabet. For the KJV different sections of the Old Testament were translated by different scholars, and they at times employed a different spelling from the spelling employed by other translators for the same name.

5) In view of the very large number of definitions I have changed, as well as the large number of

additional entries, I felt it inappropriate to still use the name "Hitchcock" for this list of names. The alphabetical sequence of names was initially taken from Hitchcock and then expanded; but neither the Scripture references nor the overwhelming number of definitions have anything in common with the work Hitchcock had produced. I believe it would be inappropriate to in any way call this list by Hitchcock's name, since it would be inappropriate to attribute the definitions presented in this list to Hitchcock. The important information here is the definitions and the scriptural references. While I did look up every single name myself, I am extremely grateful for the alphabetical framework that Hitchcock's list provided for this task.

6) Some translations of the Bible have used hyphenation for many of the longer names, while other translations have presented such names without hyphenation. As a general thing, I have omitted the hyphenation, as this makes text searches for those names in certain Bible computer software packages (e.g. the Online Bible from Larry Pierce) much easier. An exception to this is when a name does not appear in the KJV, but was taken from another translation which specifically hyphenates that name. At any rate, by providing a Scripture reference for each name, it allows the reader to check whether in his particular translation the name in question is hyphenated or not.

7) If you come across any errors, or if you know of biblical names that I should have included in this list, then please send an email to the webmaster at the following email address: webmaster@franknelte.net

Please state the nature of the error and its location in the list. For names you feel should be included in this list please state the name, the Scripture reference where that name appears, and (if in a version other than the KJV) the translation in which this name appears. With your help I would like to make this list as complete and as accurate as possible.

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To proceed please click on the letter with which the name you are researching starts.