AD NOMEN ARGUMENTA: PERSONAL NAMES AS PEJORATIVE PUNS IN ANCIENT TEXTS

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Etiam interpretatio nominis habet acumen, cum ad ridiculum convertas, quam ob rem ita quis vocetur.²

Cicero

1. Introduction

The basic meanings of personal names in ancient Semitic and ancient non-Semitic languages were normally intelligible to ancient peoples (i.e., to a native speaker of a language). For this reason, the ancients arguably selected names carefully, with the meaning of the name being an important aspect of the consideration. Along those lines, and regarding the rationale for the giving of particular name, certain things can be stated with substantial certitude: (a) Names were often associated with events surrounding the birth of a child, including physical aspects of the birth (or physical aspects of the child), the sentiments of the parents regarding the birth, or as a commentary on society at the time of the birth.³ (b) Naturally, it is also the case that a child

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¹ It is a distinct honor to contribute this article to a volume honoring Bezalel Porten, a scholar of great erudition, productivity, and kindness. Also, I am grateful to Adam Bean, my research assistant, for bibliographic work on this article.

² English translation: “There can be pungency in the understanding of a name, as when you ridicule the reason for a man being called as he is.” Cicero, De Oratore, 2.257.

³ For example, according to the Genesis narrative (Gen 38:29), Judah and Tamar’s son “burst forth” (נַּפְסֵנָה) from the birth canal (before Zerah, his twin) and so he was named Perez (נֶפְס), a name that basically means “bursting forth.” Similarly, according to the pericope that limns the birth of Jacob and Esau, it is stated that “Jacob” (יְהוֹיָצָב) was given his name because he was holding his brother’s heel (יְבֶל) during the birthing process (Gen 25:26). Sometimes the rationale for the name is embedded not only in the natal event itself, but also in precursors to that event. For example, Isaac was given a name meaning “he laughs” (יִשְׁחַץ) because the birth of a child had brought
could be named after a member of the family, with papponymy being a particular manifestation of this general practice.⁴ (c) Furthermore, there is also sufficient evidence to argue that sometimes certain names became common because a national hero of the past or present bore that name.⁵ (d) Moreover, for those living or functioning in “foreign laughter” to Sarah (Gen 21:6), but also because both she (Gen 18:12) and Abraham (Gen 17:17) had laughed (ṣiqq) in disbelief at the prospect of progeny. On occasion, a personal name was given at birth and understood to be a commentary on the times. For example, a pericope in the book of Samuel states that the wife of Phineas was in the process of giving birth at the time that she learned that her husband and brother-in-law were killed, her father-in-law died, and the ark of the covenant was captured in battle. She believed that this was a sign of the absence of the “glory” (kbwd) of God. For this reason, she named her son Ichabod (ykbwd) and then she herself died (1 Sam 4:12–22), with the personal name ykbwd consisting of two basic morphemes: the negative ʾy and kbwd (“glory,” “weightiness”). Loʾ-ʾAmmi (“not my people”) and Loʾ-Ruhamah (“no pity”) Hosea 1:6–8) are understood to be “negative commentaries” on the times. Of course, it is worth mentioning that the next reference (Hosea 2:1) to these two children eliminates the negative and refers to them simply as Ḥamm (“my people”) and Ruhamah (“Pity”). I consider this phenomenon to be different from the phenomenon of pejorative name changes, for the obvious reason that these names (e.g., Ichabod, Loʾ-ʾAmmi, Lo-Ruhamah) are given at birth, and thus are not changes to a given name that were made some time (often many years) later. In terms of names as societal commentaries, it can be said that the names Shar Yashuv (“a remnant shall return”; Isa 7:3), Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz (“The spoil speeds, the prey hastens;” Isa 8:1), and Immanuel (“God is with us;” Isa 7:14) all functioned as “positive commentaries,” that is, statements of promise and hope for 8th century Judah (though doom for their enemies). Note that Hallo has stated, regarding naming practices in the ancient Near East in general, that “personal names in the ancient Near East were by and large meaningful and generally conferred by parents or bystanders in response to circumstances surrounding the birth of the name-bearer” (William W. Hallo, “Scurrilous Etymologies,” in Pomegranates and Golden Bells: Studies in Biblical Jewish, and Near Eastern Ritual, Law, and Literature in Honor of Jacob Milgrom, eds. David P. Wright, David Noel Freedman, and Avi Hurvitz [Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1995], 767). Of course, it should be noted that sometimes the given name of a child was understood (at least at the narrative level) to be a reflection of the person’s character, sometimes even portending the future. For example, according to the text of Genesis, Esau comments on his brother’s name, stating that Jacob fulfills the meaning of his name, as he has twice “struck me on the heel” (Gen 27:36).


⁵ Such is arguably the case with the name “Yehudah,” a name that seems to have become more common in usage after the Maccabean Revolt. See Tal Ilan, Lexicon of Jewish names in Late Antiquity (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 2002), 112–125.