What's in a Name? (Part 1)

Adam? Eve? Elimelech? Naomi? Jonah? Just names or do these names have meaning that is significant for the stories in which the characters occur?

Next to the book of Psalms, the book of Jonah is my favorite. I have been reading Jonah with second year Hebrew students since the mid-80s, and I am finally getting around to putting my thoughts on paper, as I have begun two books on Jonah. Some scholars are hesitant to see any significance in Jonah’s name. I, on the contrary, think Jonah the son of Amittai is loaded with meaning for the story. Let me show you why in a two-part series.

Naming is significant in many other Old Testament stories. For example, Adam means "humanity," and Adam is the representative of the human race. Eve means "living," because she will be the mother of all of the living. Cain sounds like the word for "acquired," and Eve said she acquired a male child with the help of the Lord. Abel means "vanity," because his life was in vain, having been snuffed out in its prime. Seth means "replacement," because he was a replacement for the son that Eve had lost.

Names in the book of Ruth are also theologically significant. Elimelech means "my God is King," though Elimelech belies the meaning of his name when he leaves the land of promise for a foreign land in a time of famine. Naomi means "pleasantness," but her name is changed to Mara, which means "bitterness," and the change in name aptly describes the change in circumstance, as indicated by Naomi/Mara herself, "the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me" (Ruth 1:20). The two sons, Mahlon and Chilion, mean "sickness" and "annihilation," and both die young. Ruth sounds like the word for "friendship," even if that is not its etymological meaning, and Ruth is the epitome of covenant friendship. Boaz sounds like the word for "in him is strength," and he proves himself to be a man of strong character. The child born at the end of the story is named Obed, which means "servant," because he will care for Naomi in her old age.

Examples could be multiplied, but enough have been given to demonstrate that it is common for personal names to have theological significance in Hebrew narratives. So what is the significance of Jonah ben Amittai? Read next week's SI to find out.

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