

## **The Meaning of Beersheba and Naming in Genesis**

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A frequent phenomenon found in many of the narrative books of the bible, Genesis in particular, is the explanation of a name by way of a play on words or “folk etymology”. This feature varies in its level of explicitness, and is applied most often to personal and place names. One example of particular interest is the naming of Beersheba, which seems to be undertaken by both Abraham (21:22-33) and Isaac (26:23-33). This example is particularly interesting because of its multiplicity of interpretation. The study of this field of wordplay and naming in the bible is extensive, and a spectrum of views as to its purpose is readily uncovered. Ranging through etymology, aetiology, enrichment of character and text, and mere literary device, it seems that a moderate approach needs to be taken that reads this occurrence both as a literary technique and as a manner of expressing attitude to a given character or place.

Possibly at the root of the name derivations in the bible is the significance of a personal or place name in the Near East, to the extent of even ascribing importance to their sound. This is evidenced by the divine bestowal of new names is given in Genesis, which “symbolizes the transformation of character and destiny,”<sup>1</sup> comparable to the Egyptian practice of changing the monarch’s name at the outset of a new era or state policy<sup>2</sup>. Indeed, Yahuda argues that the Egyptian corpus makes the most extensive and significant use of assonant name interpretations in the Ancient Near East<sup>3</sup>; Casanowicz claims that name-play is favoured by the Semites and Greeks, but has also been found in older parts of the Indian Rigvedasanhita<sup>4</sup>. Garsiel takes a more literary approach, arguing that “in literature ... names must serve in place of a person’s visible and tangible presence, and this leads to an extreme emphasis upon names as expressive substitutes for actual people.”<sup>5</sup> The overwhelming

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<sup>1</sup> Sarna on 17:5, p. 124.

<sup>2</sup> Sarna (*ibid.*) gives the example of Amen-Hotep IV who changed his name to Akh-en-aten with the introduction of a revolutionary theology.

<sup>3</sup> Yahuda, p. 233. See also Casanowicz, pp. 17-18 where he quotes Heinrich Brugsch on linguistic explanations in Egyptian mythology.

<sup>4</sup> Casanowicz, p. 18.

<sup>5</sup> Garsiel §6.0, p. 212.

view within academia is one where names within biblical and related literature are the sources of great meaning and understanding<sup>6</sup>.

An early assumption was that in explaining a name through similar-sounding words, the biblical authors intend to derive its etymology. The need to provide an etymology may further be argued as a result of the transparency of meaning for later Hebrew names.<sup>7</sup> If we consider the example of Beersheba's naming, though, we will see flaw in the argument that statements like "therefore he named it ..." intend to show the word's roots. In the case of Genesis 21, we have in verses 30-31: "He [Abraham] replied [to Abimelech], 'You are to accept these seven (שבע) ewes from me as proof that I dug this well.' Hence that place was called Beersheba (באר שבע), for there the two of them swore (נשבעו) an oath."<sup>8</sup> Here we are given two explanations of Beersheba, one as meaning the number *seven* and another as relating to *oath*.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, in chapter 26 we find Isaac digging anew the wells which his father Abraham had previously dug, and lists three in verses 20-22. While digging in the location of Beersheba he makes a treaty pact with Abimelech and they exchange oaths ("וישבעו") in verse 31. Immediately following this, the text informs us that that day Isaac's servants announced that they had found water, and in verse 33: "He named it Shibah (שִׁבְעָה); therefore the name of the city is Beersheba to this day." While the obvious connection to the narrative is one of oath, the word שִׁבְעָה is actually the masculine form of שֶׁבַע, meaning *seven*. While Sarna claims<sup>10</sup> that both here and in chapter 21 the name of the well can be understood as "well of seven" or "well of oath," it is unclear here where *seven* is found in the narrative; while Beersheba could be understood as the seventh of the wells (or the site of seven wells) dug by Isaac, only four are detailed in the narrative; it could also refer to a feature of the well itself. An alternative is to understand that the Masoretic vocalisation of the word is imperfect and it should read "שִׁבְעָה" ("oath"), which is how the Septuagint

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<sup>6</sup> See also Marks (p. 23) who criticises this approach that considers names magical, identifying it as a remnant of a pre-critical approach to the bible text.

<sup>7</sup> By virtue of the Hebrew language being both the source for names and the vernacular tongue. See Casanowicz, p. 19.

<sup>8</sup> All Tanakh quotations are from the *New JPS* translation (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1985).

<sup>9</sup> We find a similar dual explanation of צחק in Isaac's name between Gen. 18:12-15 where Sarah laughs and 21:6 where Sarah is laughed at, although there neither is explicitly given as the name's explanation.

<sup>10</sup> Sarna on 21:25, p. 149.

translates the word (“ὄρκος”).<sup>11</sup> A third understanding of “Shibah” has been given, taking the Semitic root of שבע as generally relating to good fortune, as paralleled by the Samaritan Targum’s translation of באשרי in Gen 30:13 as במשבעי.<sup>12</sup> Yahuda also writes that in Egyptian, the “water of ‘seven ells’” is a proverbial expression for abundance.<sup>13</sup> Even taking an understanding that only a single meaning of *oath* is to be understood in 26:33, two meanings are still provided in chapter 21, implying that these cannot be understood as intending etymology. Gunkel, on the other hand, considers the dual explanation of the name as evidence that 21:22-34 is derived from multiple sources,<sup>14</sup> but even so, the redacted form of the text seems to be implying something other than etymology by giving multiple plays on the name’s root.

Further evidence, though, that these explanations of names cannot be etymology is found elsewhere. While in the case of Beersheba, where academia understands the name to originally mean “seven wells,” שבע has at least “correctly” been understood by the text as *seven*, in many other cases the given assonant explanation and the actual name are quite plainly not the correct derivation. Commonly cited for this claim is the midrash on the naming of Noah (נח, root נו"ה) by way of *comfort* (נח"ם) in Gen. R. 5:29, which exclaims that it should either say Noah will give rest (from the root נו"ה), or that his name should be Nahman (נחמן, root נח"ם).<sup>15</sup> Further, the idea that the name for Babylonia did not come from Hebrew בבל as in Genesis 11:9 is likely to be clear to the biblical author.<sup>16</sup> Finally, in cases like the deriving of אברהם from “אב המון גוים” (in Genesis 17:5) not all of the name can be derived from the explanation. Thus it seems clear that these “folk etymologies” are

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<sup>11</sup> The LXX consistently translates Beersheba—rather than transliterating the name—as Φρέαρ ὄρκου (“well of oath”). On this, Gunkel writes (p. 297): “If the text is correct, it should certainly be pronounced שְׁבַעָה. The narrator thinks that *šebu’a* later became *šeba*’. But it may be that one should read שְׁבַע and understand it in the same sense. The rabbis, with no sense of the context of the legend, read *šib’a* “seven” following 21:28ff.”

<sup>12</sup> Oppenheim in Berliner’s *Magazin*, 1875, cited by Hertz on Gen. 26:33, p. 97.

<sup>13</sup> Yahuda, p. 256.

<sup>14</sup> Gunkel, p. 230.

<sup>15</sup> Genesis Rabbah, 25:2.

<sup>16</sup> The city was originally named in Sumerian as *ka-dingir-ra*, but calqued into Akkadian as *bab-il*, “Gate of God”. See Sarna on 10:10, p. 74.

found much more flexibly than by the morphological and semantic rules of language, and are not intended to be linguistic in nature, but rather are a literary feature.<sup>17</sup>

Related to the etymological approach is an aetiological understanding of biblical namings, which takes the narratives in the Book of Genesis as a form of folklore resolving popular curiosity about natural and cultural phenomena.<sup>18</sup> As such it needs to take a position where the narrative is related primarily for the sake of the naming that results from it. In the case of Beersheba, the tale firstly defines the patriarchs as the founders and owners of the land, and secondarily explains its sacredness by way of the ancestor's oath taken there.<sup>19</sup> The first problem with this is that it would generally imply that the biblical author intended to give an etymology for a name through a narrative, and we have shown that the derivations are not sensibly etymological. Nonetheless it could be countered that even an assonant connection may be sufficient for an aetiological relation between a narrative and a derived name. Another small issue is encountered with regards to Beersheba in that it is referred to in 21:14 as the site of Hagar's wandering prior to its purported naming later in the chapter, and even then it is named twice. This seeming difficulty is easily washed away by source criticism, but also could be understood as a case of using later names for geographical reference.<sup>20</sup> Another difficulty with the aetiological approach to namings is presented by the existence of parallels in similar ANE literature. Yahuda brings numerous examples from Egyptian texts that incidentally explain the names of gods in a similar manner to the biblical text:

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<sup>17</sup> See Garsiel §0.1.2.3, pp. 18-19.

<sup>18</sup> This position is notably espoused by Gunkel. It would, for instance, understand narratives behind names as comparable to the aetiology of husband and wife in 2:24; the snake's nature in 3:13-14; the subjugation of Canaan in 9:25; the prohibition of the sciatic nerve in 32:33. On this position in the history of understanding biblical name explanations, see Marks, p. 22.

<sup>19</sup> See Gunkel, p. 296.

<sup>20</sup> See also reference to the locality of  $\eta$  in 14:14, prior to birth of its namesake in 30:6, although it could also be understood that the place by that name may have indeed preceded the tribe, and may still be a difficult passage for those who consider the verse of Mosaic origin. Another example of reference antecedent to naming is of  $\zeta$  in 13:10, 14:2, 8; named in 19:22.

“Then the Majesty of this God (Re) said to Thot: “thou shalt be my representative in my stead, thou shalt be called Thot, representative of Re. I shall, however, cause thee to send forth others (*h'b*) still greater than thou art”; thus arose (the name) *hb* (Ibis) for Thot’.”<sup>21</sup>

This at least indicates that the verses explaining the name derivation are unlikely to be mere insertions, and that the associated narratives may have purpose or historical-mythical relevance apart from that required by the name explanation. A final contention with the aetiological approach is the prevalence of less-explicit phonetic plays on biblical names than those where individual characters or places are named. One naming that is only implicitly giving is that of man, אדם, from אדמה in 2:7; even less explicit is Seir, שעיר, from כּאדרת שער in 25:25. In many cases, a naming isn't involved, but merely a play on a name within the narrative, what Garsiel calls a *Midrashic Name Derivation* or MND. Although Garsiel's book in its entirety explores this concept and finds even less explicit cases, some examples include the frequency of the letters נה in the flood story; Gad's blessing by his father in 49:19 in contrast to his naming in 30:11; and Esau's pun on Jacob's name in 27:36.<sup>22</sup> Garsiel also points out that this is a feature of other texts in the Ancient Near East where in the Ugaritic epic of Aqhat, King Danel is described as “judging the case of the widow, and adjudicating the cause of the orphan” (*ydn dn almnt yṯṯt ṯṯt ytm*),<sup>23</sup> which utilises the root *dyn* from Danel's name twice.<sup>24</sup> The MND seems to be much more arbitrary than that required to see aetiology in biblical namings. Nonetheless, it may be worth considering whether the biblical name explanations are closer in nature to seemingly aetiological passages in Genesis, or to the phenomenon of the MND. Overall, by virtue of the extensive wordplay—particularly on names—integrated into the bible and other Near Eastern texts, a wholly aetiological approach to these biblical name explanations is unseemly.

In contrast to the previous approach where the name necessitates an explanatory narrative, one can be taken where the story is the essential part of the text, and the MND or name explanation enriches the name's meaning or the character it refers to. In this context, Yahuda takes a more maximalist approach which sees that

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<sup>21</sup> Roeder, Günther. *Urkunden zur Religion des alten Ägypten*. Jena, 1915. p. 147f. Quoted in Yahuda, p. 234. See *ibid.* 234ff. for numerous other examples.

<sup>22</sup> Also discussed in Casanowicz, p. 39.

<sup>23</sup> 1 Aqhat 23-24; 2 Aqhat V:7-8

<sup>24</sup> Garsiel, §0.2.1[1], p. 22. Cf. Gen. 49:16 where the same play is made regarding נן. See other examples of the phenomenon in ANE texts in Garsiel, §0.2.1, p. 22ff.

“as in the Egyptian ... narratives, the motivations of the names conferred are not mere plays upon words by later scribes, but were, from the first, conceived as perpetual memorials of notable episodes.”<sup>25</sup> A name thus predicts the nature and narratives of a character’s life.<sup>26</sup> Garsiel suggests that in many cases the biblical author seems to understand that a naming had taken prior to or apart from the narrated event, and that the connection by wordplay is an authorial praise of the ancient name giver who unconsciously gave a particularly appropriate name that would fit later events. A name is hence given allegorical value by its comparison to similar-sounding words in an appropriate context. Upon the idea of *seven* within the name of Beersheba is compounded in the reader’s mind the idea of oath and sacredness, and possibly that of good fortune; alternatively, the text praises an original namer of the site for the ironic use of שבע in its name. A biblical naming explanation thus serves to add interpretive character to a name, or establish mental connections related to the character.

A final approach to biblical naming explanations and MNDs sees them as mere literary techniques, without ascribing to them any significant interpretive or narrative value. Marks discusses this as an approach of American scholars who sought to oppose Gunkel’s aetiological argument by returning these passages to their peripheral status in the text, to act as mnemonics or didactic aids.<sup>27</sup> Another approach is shown by Casanowicz’s where assonance and multiplicity of word meaning is used for emphasis and vividness of expression, merely a device to enhance the literary qualities of the narrative.<sup>28</sup> Other common uses of assonance in modern literature may also be candidates, including cohesion of text or thematic highlighting, as may be entailed, for instance, in the constant use of ברך and בכר (and possibly ברה) in Genesis 27. The “naming” of Beersheba and the use of שבע in its surroundings could thus serve as a mere literary device that reminds readers of events that once took place there. This represents the most minimalist approach which sees assnant plays on names in the bible as only literary in purpose.

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<sup>25</sup> Yahuda, p. 257.

<sup>26</sup> This is commonly regarded the case with such characters as מִחֹלֶן and כְּלִיִּין in Ruth and their fates, or regarding נִמְרוֹד in Genesis as understood for instance by Josephus, *Antiquities* 1.114-5. Such clearly appropriate naming (*sprechende Namen*) is not commonly used in the bible, and Marks suggests this may be because of its close association with the religious literature of Egypt and Mesopotamia (p. 24).

<sup>27</sup> Marks, p. 23.

<sup>28</sup> Casanowicz, pp. 20f.

A middle ground needs to be taken; it is likely that not all instances of biblical naming explanations can be explained by any one of the theories presented above. It is quite clear in some cases that the Genesis text implies that an additional reading of a name should be added to the basic one, as such presenting an attitude of the biblical author to the name's referent. A prime example of this is the naming of **בבל** which would usually be understood as "Gate of God," but instead is mocked by being compared to **בלל**, confusion, while at the same time not attempting to present this as the actual origin of the name. Similarly, the implied understanding of **שעיר** as belonging to its hairy leader may also be intended as mockery. In contrast, the narrative's heroes are often given appropriately heroic connections to their name, such as **ישראל** for striving (**שר"ה**) with an angel. Correspondingly, the explanation of places in terms of the patriarchs' actions there does not necessarily imply the patriarch's founding of that place, but does provide for their descendents a connection to various locations within the land, thus associated with a divine covenant of its inheritance. With this understanding, multiple puns on one name are certainly possible and provide a new level of interpretation of the character's name. In the particular case of Beersheba, the tales play on the root **שבע**, enhancing the narrative in its thematic focus on **שבע**, while linking the place name in multiple connections to the patriarchs, despite the fact that the location has already been mentioned earlier in the text. Further, the repetition of this incident with Isaac after its occurrence with Abraham serves to indicate a connection between their two oaths and travels, while also possibly adding additional nuance to **שבע** by way of alternative meanings of **שבעה**; it is an exemplar of Ramban's oft-quoted maxim regarding Genesis: "the tales of the [fore]fathers are signs to the sons/descendents." Other examples have been shown to be much more arbitrary in terms of their covenantal meaning. So while the mental connection drawn between names and narratives that adds covenantal meaning, also provides textual cohesion and didactic associations.

While numerous proposals have been given to explain explanations for character names in Genesis, none seem to be complete on their own. It is quite apparent that the Bible does not attempt to argue linguistically for a certain etymological derivation of names, but has major literary concern. In many cases, then, they entail structural, narrative and interpretive implications, and are not wholly arbitrary, nor wholly aetiological in nature. The "namings" of Beersheba thus creatively weave **שבע** into their narrative in order to both provide narrative cohesion and creative covenantal interpretation in connection with the land.

## References

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