

The Names of the Wandering Jew

Livia Bitton

During the last decades of the sixteenth century, a mysterious stranger appeared at the outskirts of villages and towns of Europe. He was a tall, lanky man with long hair and enormous, penetrating eyes. They called him mostly Ahasverus, but some called him Isaac Laquedem, and even Cartaphilus, Buttadeus, and some--Juan Espera en Dios. Or, simply, the Wandering Jew. He looked about thirty, or a hundred, years old but the light in his eyes and the wisdom in his voice, and the pain in his posture, were centuries' old.

And in fact, he was centuries' old. He was a contemporary of Jesus, a Jewish shoemaker of Jerusalem, or, perhaps, a gatekeeper of Pontius Pilate; then again, he may have been an officer of the High Priest. At any rate, he lived in Jerusalem at the time of the Crucifixion, and when Jesus was going to his martyrdom, he stopped to rest in front of this Jew's house. Whereupon the Jew came out of his house and drove him on, with the words, "Go on, thou tempter and seducer, to receive what you have earned."

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Or: "Go on, do not rest here," Jesus then turned to him and said, "I go, but you will await me until I come again."

Or: "I go but you shall not rest, you shall wander on the earth until I come again." And it came to pass, that after the Crucifixion, the Jew was unable to return to his family in Jerusalem but started on his endless journey roaming the earth. He grew weary and old, his feet became calloused, his clothes, threadbare, but he is unaware of these physical aspects of his being. His only desire is to do penance for his sin and find peace in death. This is denied him, however. He must wander until the Second Coming.

News of the Wandering Jew's appearance would stir excitement, even panic in some places. He was believed to bring disaster--famine, flood, epidemic--or herald the end of the world. In Moscow he was expected in the year 1666--the Antichrist come to unite the enemies of Christianity. In other places, notably in Northern Europe, he was believed to bless the plow and bring plenty to the soil.

The legend originally arose in the thirteenth century,

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during the height of scholasticism, when the Church attempted to connect church doctrine with science. Vague references in the New Testament to eternal life, to the Second Coming, to deathlessness as a possible reward or punishment found substantiation in the legend of the Wandering. It was first recorded in several thirteenth-century monastic chronicles, but as folklore it did not achieve wide currency. As a matter of fact, interest in the legend waned so that during the fourteenth and fifteenth century hardly anyone mentioned the legendary Jew.

Then suddenly, in the wake of the Protestant Reformation, the myth of the Wandering Jew sprouted wings, and in a short time the mysterious stranger became a celebrated phenomenon. After his first, highly publicized appearance in Germany, sightings of the Wandering Jew far outnumbered our UFO sightings. Like wildfire, news of the Wandering Jew's appearance spread throughout all of Europe. The first written account was a German imprint entitled, Kurtze Beschreibung und Erzählung von einem Juden mit Namen Ahasverus, in 1602, followed by copies of it in

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different countries and different languages: Flanders, Estonia Denmark, Sweden, Italy, Spain, Portugal, Poland, Ukraine, Podolia, etc.

Different versions of the legend mushroomed, and each in version a different name was given to the Wandering Jew--a baffling and fascinating variety of appellations.

The second chronicle to incorporate the tale of the Jew in the thirteenth century gave him the name Cartaphilus, and by that name he was known until his sensational entry into the turmoil of the period of Reformation-Counter-Reformation. Then, he was introduced to the age as Ahasverus--an apparently new name unrelated to the former. While Cartaphilus did not altogether disappear from usage, the Protestant name Ahasverus became the more popular from the seventeenth century on, especially in Central and Northern Europe. In the Mediterranean countries, another name, Buttadeus, had appeared as early as the thirteenth century which now was transformed to Buttadeo, or Botadeo, in Italy, to Boutedieu in France and to Votadio, or Votaddio, in Spain and Portugal.

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To complicate matters even further, as early as the beginning of the fifteenth century, the name Juan Espera en Dios, and, somewhat later, Juan de Voto a Dios, appeared in other Spanish, Johannes Buttadeos in Latin, Joao Espera em Dios, in Portuguese, Giovanni Servo di Dio and Giovanni Votaddio in Italian, sources.

What is the origin and etymological development of these names? In what way do they all relate to the Wandering Jew, revealing what attitudes and expectations of that strange phenomenon so frightening yet so fascinating in his suffering and deathlessness? Just as the figure himself, the names he is called by are puzzling, to say the least. They have positive and negative connotation, they are either laudatory or derogatory--just like the mood which created this creature of dichotomy. Did he stem from the tradition of reward or from the tradition of punishment? Was he granted everlasting life as a special divine dispensation, or was he condemned to eternity as a curse? The tales and their versions support the latter supposition, the names--the former.

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Beginning with Cartaphilus, the earliest name recorded, the Greek "kartos" (strongly, well) and "philos" (loved) seems the closest explanation. This meaning of the name suggests that the Wandering Jew was indeed St. John, the "disciple whom Jesus loved," (Mat. 16:28; John 21:20-22) and to whom he promised life until the Second Coming. Cartaphilus' baptism to Joseph in the same version of the legend carries the notion of favored status even further, as the Hebrew etymology of the name suggests "increase" of grace. A Christian legend of John's grave having been empty when opened by disciples goes on to buttress this aspect of the myth. Thus, Cartaphilus, the "well-loved-one" wandered on the face of the earth not to atone for his sin but to affirm his faith.

Buttadeus, when explained by attempting to apply an ungrammatical solution based on Vulgar Latin--"batuere" (to beat, strike, shove), "deus" (God)--reveals a negative connotation and points to the tradition of punishment of which the legend may have been fashioned. According to this allusion, the Wandering Jew was the shoe-maker, or

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gate-keeper, or officer who struck Jesus ordering him to go on, and received life eternal as an exercise in penitence. All other forms of the name--Buttadeo, Botadeo, Boutedieu, Votadio, Vottadio--are derivations affected by local idiom. Hence, Buttadeus, the "god-batterer" was to wander from age to age bearing the burden of guilt.

John, in the form of Johannes, or Juan, or Giovanni, appended to the latter name, in combinations such as Johannes Buttadeos, Giovanni Votadio (in a manuscript by Antonio di Francesco di Andrea, 15th century), or Juan de Voto, is a paradoxical joining of two opposing traditions. In these versions of the legend, the Wandering Jew indeed is an amalgam of sinfulness and benevolence, in some instances extending cures for diseases rather than causing them. Juan de Voto is apparently an inverted form of Juan Votadio.

The name Juan Espera en Dios perhaps has its origins in an old Andalusian folktale. In it the Wandering Jew is a God-baiter. He was insolent to Jesus and therefore he must wander on the earth. On Good Friday, at 3 P.M., he

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sees a vision of Calvary--three crosses. At the foot of the taller cross there stands a woman who calls out to him: "Juan, espera en Dios!" (John, place your hope in God!) Obviously, this folktale and the name extracted from it, are also a blend of opposing traditions: the name John would indicate reward, the process of penitence, punishment. Giovanni Servo di Dio and Juan de Para Siempre (in the manuscript of a Spanish Jesuit, Balthazar Gracian, 1584-1658) are simply referring to John "the servant of God" and "John the eternal."

Isaac Laquedem of French and Flemish accounts of the legend is probably a combination of the cant name for a Jew--Isaac--and a corruption of the Hebrew "from the East." But what about Ahasuaerus, Ahasverus, or Ahasver? What tradition is accountable for this epithet of the Wandering Jew? Ahasuerus was the name of the Persian king who figures prominently in the Biblical Book of Esther. He is neither a Jew, nor wicked, nor was he in any way implicated in punishment--sedentary or mobile. Why utilize this name? It has been suggested that the Purim play in which

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Jews annually reenact the story of the Book of Esther familiarized the figure of Ahasuerus with the Gentile public making the name appear a likely choice for a Jew. Although this suggestion would be unacceptable based on historical reality of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries when Jews lived in total isolation from the Gentile populace and thus their Purim plays performed in the obscurity of their walled-in ghettos would have no impact on Gentile practices of naming, one may assume that the Esther story was familiar to the Gentiles from the Reformation drama in which it figured prominently. However, the accessibility of the name does not explain its usage. The Biblical figure of Ahasuerus does not, by any stretch of imagination or scholarship, justify appending his name to the Wandering Jew. If one considers familiarity with a Biblical story as impetus for name borrowing, and if the story of Esther is a case in point, Mordecai is the only possibility: since he is the only male Jew in the story with implications of both punishment and reward attached to his figure, an association with the Wandering Jew would

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be somewhat more plausible.

Some suggest Ahasuerus to be a garbling of the name Cartaphilus. Why not a garbling of the name Juan Espera en Dios? The Kurtze Beschreibung, the originator of the name Ahasuerus, does report on the appearance of the Wandering Jew in Madrid, perhaps referred to by the above name.

A conspicuous absence of a name for the Wandering Jew in the Slavic versions of the legend seems to add to the obscure quality of the figure and magnify his panic-potential. In these East-European versions, the Jew is ominously referred to as "The Jew" or the "Eternal Jew," a reference borrowed from the equally sinister "der ewige Jude."

If familiarity breeds contempt, unfamiliarity breeds fear. This awesome figure born of obscure traditions, cloaked in the mystery of supernatural powers, subject to the dread of deathlessness, implicated in the Crucifixion, associated with flood, famine, epidemic--is but the product of fear, a symbolic projection of the terror of the unknown.

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In order to temper the effect of this awesome creation of the mind, the earliest versions of the legend had ascribed a name to him. And the name, the earliest. Cartaphilus, is ideal for the objective of mitigating the message of the legendary image. Suggestive of love, it undoubtedly served as an effective counterpoint to the threatening impact of the figure. Thus, the names Joseph, John, in all its versions, especially Juan Espera en Dios, continue this tendency of softening the myth.

In the profusion of literature which adapted the legend of the Wandering Jew the name becomes insignificant as myth develops into a symbol. The Wandering Jew becomes Universal Man in the nineteenth century--the representative of all men in their struggle against God. He is the sinner, the rebel, the penitent, the sufferer. He is at times Cain, at other times Ulysses or Job or Prometheus or Faust. He is either Dumas' Isaac, Croly's Salathiel, Lewis' Ambrosio or Du Maurier's Svengali, or even Carlyle's Professor Teufelsdröckh. What's more--James Joyce's Poldy Bloom... Or, simply, the Wandering Jew of Zhukovsky,

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Gorky, Shelley and Wordsworth--a concept come of age, dispensing with names.

Livia Bitton

Herbert H. Lehman College

City University of New York