

SOME PUZZLING ASPECTS IN THE ETIOLOGICAL NARRATIVES
of the
BOOK OF GENESIS

Richard A. Henshaw

After almost two hundred years of research into the makeup of the early stories of the Old Testament, we are finally realizing the richness and intricacies of these narratives. Set as he was in a wider cultural milieu, the Hebrew story teller is best understood in the context of the earlier literature of the Canaanites on one hand and the Mesopotamians on the other.

The Canaanite background comes mostly from a place in Syria called Ugarit, whose literature is dated about 500 years before the usual dating of the Old Testament tales, and the Mesopotamian background is to a large degree from so-called Old-Babylonian times, about 1000 years before the Old Testament, but going back to a Sumerian literature with roots several hundred years before this. Thus we are coming to realize the historical depth the Hebrew writers have to draw upon. And, even though we are beyond the days of naively looking for "parallels," we are assisted in asking the right questions by reading this earlier literature. This background will be presumed, but hardly touched upon, in all that is said here.

The Old Testament is full of etiological legends, i.e., stories explaining the origin of some phenomenon, as why the Dead Sea is salty: from Lot's wife being turned into a pillar of salt; why the rainbow appears after the storm: to remind people of the covenant that a flood would no longer come and destroy all the earth; why the serpent crawls on its belly: because it is cursed as a result of beguiling the woman to eat from the tree when the Lord God commanded her not to eat.

Many of these stories, indeed, most of them, have an etymological twist to their etiology. The stories explain how the names of persons and places came to be. In fact, etymological etiology is so frequent in the tales of Genesis --six in the early proto-history, and forty in the patriarchal narratives--that it would seem to be the norm. That is, to introduce an ancestor in these early tales one normally interprets his name by a device in the story.

For an example using a personal name, the man named his wife Havvāh "Eve" because she was the mother of all living ḥāy (Genesis 3.20). For an example using a geographical name, the story of Jacob wrestling with an angel (Genesis 32.31) ends by Jacob forcing a blessing out of the angel, and being given a significant change of name to Israel. Then Jacob

names the place *pnuēl* because there he saw God face to face, implying that it was from *ēl* "God" and *pnu* "face of."

Where these stories originally came from we do not know; perhaps each of them had a local origin and was later incorporated into a loosely constructed whole. But the basic point to be made at the outset is that each of the stories is presented as part of the ongoing flow of narrative of the Book of Genesis. Yet the place-names probably, and the personal names possibly, did not come about this way, but existed already. That is, the narrative says that what happened in the story brought about the name, whereas in actuality we believe that it was the name that brought about the story, or, at least, an element of it.

So far, so good, on an elementary level. We are amazed, however, when we realize the restrictions the stories must fit into: given a place-name, write a story which fits into the general theology you are presenting with many other tales, and which uses in its key sentence a word-play on that place-name. Sometimes the narrator also integrated into the process a folk custom, as a food taboo, or the sacredness of brick-making, or the basic place digging a well had in their lives.

The story teller, then, stressed the name. The key sentence in the story, why the activity or person or place

came about concerned the name. As Martin Buber called it in 1927 (M. Buber and F. Rosenzweig, Die Schrift und ihre Verdeutschung, Berlin, 1936, 211 ff.) it is a Leitwort Stil, a style using a key word.

So, as befits two of the major streams of antiquity, we refer to this in either a Greek or a Semitic manner. We use the term etiological, from *hē aitia* "a cause, origin," or we may refer to a story. When in Genesis 2 the Lord God made the beasts and the birds, he brought them to Adam "and whatever Adam called the living creature, that was its name." (Genesis 2.19).

To show the many-layered nature of these tales, I will give examples from the Book of Genesis. The story of the building of the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11.1-9) is only nine sentences long, yet is capable of rich analysis on several levels. It tells of the people originally having only one language, making brick and building a city and a tower. The tower is to have its top in heaven. Omitting some theological aspects, it goes on to say that the Lord came to see what they were doing, and when he found out he confounded *bālal* their language, i.e., the language of all the earth, that they may not understand one another's tongue. So the name of the city was given as Babel, because the Lord "balal'ed" it.

This story has as its background the building of the famous ziggurat temple-tower at Babylon. This was in a complex called, in Sumerian, *é-sag-ila* "the house of the lifting-up of the head," and the ziggurat itself was named *é-temen-an-ki* "the house of the foundation of heaven and earth."

The Hebrew story, which tells of the tower "with its head in heaven" (11.4), echoes one or both of these names. There are, furthermore, several Babylonian creation stories which use some of these elements, but whose purposes were quite different.

The question I want to raise is this: did the writer of Genesis know that *bālal* and *bābel* were from two different "roots," as we would put it? I think that he did, and the implications of that is the theme of my paper.

The example just given is complex, and many items were left dangling, so let us go on to a clearer one. Many of the patriarchs have stories told of them in which their name is changed. We don't know the significance of this, but the prevalent theory is that each of the names represents a separate tradition, which were then brought together.

Thus Abraham, after he had made a covenant with the Lord (Genesis 17.5), was told that his name would no longer be

ābrām but ābrāhām, because he would become an āb h^amon goyim
 "a father of a multitude of nations."

The second name, ābrāhām, is supposed to be explained by the above phrase. It fits the first two words pretty well, except that the r is missing. And, of course, that makes all the difference in the world! We now know that the name means āb "father" and rāhām perhaps an Aramaized form of rām "high:" "The father (an epithet of a deity) is great."

This is quite different from "father of a multitude," because the story left out the r. My contention is that they all knew very well how to translate the name ābrāhām, and they knew that āb h^amon "father of a multitude" wasn't correct. But literary imagination overcame linguistic accuracy.

You will have noticed that these stories deal with two categories of names: personal names and place names. For us, personal names are a lot easier to explain, and we are a lot more confident in our ability to translate them than place names. But place names provide the real challenge to the researcher. We have a unique opportunity of seeing the ancient mind at work in the way the storyteller dealt with the place Beer-sheba.

There are several variants of the story of how this place came to be named in our tales. I'll merely give the highlights.

1) Genesis 26.33 tells of Isaac digging a well near this place, of finding water, and so of naming the well shib^ĕāh., which apparently is to be taken as a dialect of sāb^ĕāh "abundance." So the city was called as if "well of abundance."

The second variant 2) Genesis 21.31 tells of Abraham making a covenant with a Philistine chief and swearing to deal faithfully with him, the key word being hishshāb^ĕāh "he swore." The present exchanged, common in covenant-making ceremonies, was seven lambs, with the key word sheba^ĕ "seven." It goes on to say, "therefore the place was named Beer-sheba, as if from "well of seven"; but also because both of them swore together, as if from the root sh b^ĕ "swear." It seems that the writer had to intertwine the tradition "well of swearing" with that of "well of seven."

Our present understanding of the name Beer-sheba takes into account the oasis nature of the city, which could have been named for the feature which makes it liveable, its underground water supply. Local tradition tells of seven wells (K. Baedeker, Palestine and Syria, Leipzig, 1906, p. 169), but some people count only five. One would expect "wells" in the name rather than "well" and would expect the numeral before the noun, but this is not mandatory, and especially when we are probably dealing with a pre-Hebrew language.

T. Nöldeke (Archiv für Religionswissenschaft, 7, 340-44) explained the name as "well of seven," the seven referring to a group of gods, perhaps those of the Pleiades, which the babylonizing culture of the Levant at that time would have accepted. L. Köhler (Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft, 55, 166) argues without explanation for shiv⁶āh "Fulle, Überfluss." J. Lewy (Hebrew Union College Annual, 7, p. 40 n. 178) explains it as the seven winds, found in the Mesopotamian incantation series utukkī limnūti and elsewhere.

Attempting some conclusion, we could cautiously say that the GNs with numbers in them do exist, but are rare, and are often folk-etymologies. GNs with elements like "pact, agreement, gift," describing an historical act, also exist but rarely. We could add to the above list of possibilities a folk-etymology from an unknown language. The name of the place may be older than the Hebrews, and the story tellers may not have known the original reason for the naming, nor would they have been bound to the original if they had known it. Thus they drew upon their imaginative ingenuity. In the end, we are left rather dangling, when we ask the relationship between the reasons for the naming given in the tales, and the "real" reasons. If that bothers some people, let me state that this is standard for this kind of study.

Having given a few examples in some detail to illustrate our method, let me now give the highlights of a few more. Esau the brother of Jacob was faint when he came in from the fields one day, and asked for some of Jacob's "red, red pottage" (Genesis 25.30). So he was called as a by-name^{Edom} Edom, the word for "red." But he is the eponymous ancestor of the land of Edom, in southern Jordan today, called "red" undoubtedly because of its red soil, simple colors being a common place name element. Here we find that the translation was correct, but not the reasoning.

Lot is told by the angel (Genesis 19.22) to escape the destruction of Sodom by fleeing to a nearby city, "a little one," named So^{ar} Zoar. The city was called Zoar "little one" because Lot was told to go to a little city. This element fits rather loosely into the tale as a whole. This is a reasonable city-name, however, because of other ancient Near Eastern adjectival place name elements, as new, old, high, large, small. So, as in the above case, the translation is possible but the reason given in the text is improbable. A difficulty in this case, also, is that the word xo^{ar} is a participle form, an odd form for a place name.

The second son of Joseph was named ephrayim Ephraim because Joseph said "God has made me fruitful" hiphranī

(Genesis 41.52), supposedly from a root p r h "be fruitful." It seems better to explain this as a place name, a loan word from Akkadian appāru "reed marsh, reed bed, lagoon."

Two children, Jacob and Esau, struggled within the womb of Rebekah. The first one came out red and they called him Esau, another explanation of the by-name Edom "red", above. The second one held onto his heel and so was called ya^{ca}qob Jacob, as if from the word ^{ca}āqēb "heel." The name is then supposedly to be interpreted as "he heeled" or the like, as a dog does. This is highly unlikely, because personal names do not fit into this category. The name is an old one, and is found in the 18th and 15th century B.C. in Eastern Syria, in a tributary of the upper Habur River in Amorite territory, at Chagar Bazar. As to meaning, the closest we can come is found in the cognate languages of Old South Arabic and in the Tigre dialect of Ethiopic meaning "protect," a common idea in Semitic personal names.

The patriarchal name Gad is explained in one place as "fortune" gad (Genesis 30.11), and in another as "troop" from the root g d d (Genesis 49.19). Both would seem to be impossible for a personal name. It is found as Gaddu, a deity in Mesopotamian literature, or as the Arabic word jadd "father, forefather, ancestor," either of which would be more reasonable.

From a perusal of the etymological etiological type of tale in the Book of Genesis we have learned many things. We note that the narrator consciously used a fiction when he explained an already existing place name. From the number of times he translated a personal name or a geographical name correctly, according to our understanding, we find that he knew how to do this, if he chose to. But I would underline the opinion: he purposely chose not to in many cases. This was to fulfill the needs of the story, not because he didn't know how to in those instances. In fact, the etymology he used was often so far from the original that we wonder whether he purposely stayed far from the actual translation. Perhaps this was a way of showing cleverness, or even humor, to stay as far from the actual as possible. If that were the case, the biblical writer's literary standard would have been directly opposite from that of us. To them, the "worse" the pun the more acceptable it was.

Richard A. Henshaw

Colgate Rochester Divinity School
Bexley Hall
Crozer Theological Seminary