

# New Hebrew Names in the Second Temple Period: A By-Product of Biblical Exegesis

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## Abstract

Biblical names are a vital historic-linguistic aspect of Hebrew culture in Antiquity. This paper will discuss biblical personal names and name giving practices that evolved in the Second Temple period (539 BCE-70 CE). Personal names reflect such dramatic historic processes, as the canonization of the Bible and its early exegesis. The clarification of the biblical text resulted in the creation of new personal names, e.g. from misread genealogical terms (Ahian, Vashni, Avihu), misunderstood foreign words (Hen) or paleographic errors (Yinnon for *yikkon*), as well as the reinterpretation of the sacred texts (Avigdor, Malachi). Other synchronic onomastic developments that will not be dealt with in this paper include a renewed popular religious commitment (Yosef>Yehosef), the growing influence of Aramaic and Greek cultures that led to the adoption of non-Hebrew names as well as the fashion of giving double Hebrew and vernacular names. On the other hand, the increased frequency of papponymy reduced the number of unique names known from an earlier period. All of these onomastic developments enriched and invigorated the Jewish reservoir of Hebrew names that would continue to develop up until our own times.

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This paper will discuss Hebrew personal names and name giving practices that evolved in ancient Israel during the Second Temple period (539 BCE-70 CE). Personal names reflect such dramatic historic processes as the dissolution of the tribal society of an earlier period, the formation of the Jewish Diaspora, and the subsequent influence and impact of Aramaic and Greek languages, which brought about the adoption of non-Hebrew names, as well as the fashion of giving double names, a Hebrew and a vernacular one (Demsky 1999). On the other hand, the fashion of papponymy reduced the number of unique creative names characteristic of the biblical period (Demsky 2016).

Yet another important development at this time was the canonization of the Bible and the exegesis needed for clarifying the meaning and establishing the best reading of the sacred text. In particular, I will try to demonstrate how this interface with the written canon resulted in the creation of a select number of new Hebrew names. A close scrutiny of these new names indicates that they were created either because of a palaeographic error or a misreading or misunderstanding of a foreign word or a technical term, especially kinship designations. Moreover, these names might be the result of intentional reinterpretation in light of later sensitivities. However, once the text was canonized, these new names were accepted as legitimate Hebrew personal names.

I have called this type of name a 'ghost-name' (in Hebrew: *shem refa'im*), an onomastic category that has not been given proper recognition in name studies (Demsky 2011). Like a ghost-word, i.e. a word that has come into a language through a misreading of a

text, or a typographical error or misunderstanding, so too ‘ghost-names’ were the result of textual emendation or interpretation.

The ‘ghost-name’ is not to be confused with another category, i.e. a ‘no-name’, such as biblical Pelsoni-Almoni (Ruth 4:1) or Palmoni (Daniel 8:13), used in a pejorative sense (Demsky 1997). Compare also Beit-Halutz-Hanna`al (Deuteronomy 25:10), or the rabbinic epithet Aḥer ‘The Other’, for the apostate Elisha ben Abuya, or its plural form Aḥerim, i.e. ‘Others’, given his disciple Rabbi Meir as a punishment for trying to usurp the authority of Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel (Babylonian Talmud, Horayot 13b). This latter no-name was a cruel punishment for someone like Rabbi Meir, who is considered to be the first Jewish onomastician, a scholar meticulous in investigating names (Babylonian Talmud, Yoma 83b). Comparing these two types, the no-name is always intentional and very often a literary device created by the author of the text, while the ghost-name for the most part is accidental. However, as we will see below, rabbinic exegesis may also have had a hand in creating some of these new names. In sum, all of these onomastic developments enriched and invigorated the reservoir of Hebrew names that would continue to develop in Antiquity (Ilan 2002, 2008, 2011, 2012).

Let us now return to these novel names that broadly fit the definition of a ghost-name which became a legitimate part of Hebrew nomenclature because they were found in the Bible.

### Yinnon – A Scribal Error

The Hebrew name Yinnon is an example of a ghost-name, which is apparent by how it came to be: the unique verb *yinnón*, translated contextually as ‘will endure’, is found in Psalms 72:17, in a prayer blessing King Solomon with longevity (Paul 1972):

May his name be eternal // while the sun lasts, may *his name endure*;  
Let men invoke his blessedness upon themselves // Let all nations count him happy.

The passage echoes verse 5 in that chapter:

Let them fear you as long as the sun shines, while the moon lasts, generations on end.

No doubt, of all creations, the sun and the moon exemplify endurance and eternity.

The difficult *hapax yinnón* in the imperfect tense is derived from a supposed root *nun*. It has been interpreted in its context as meaning ‘to endure’ and related to the noun *nin* ‘(great) grandchild’, signifying ‘perpetuity’ (Gen 21:23, Isa 14:22, Job 18:19). However, a glance at another blessing formula in Ps. 89:38 *kayareah yikkón `olām*, i.e., ‘As the moon, established forever’, as well as one in the Phoenician version of the Azitawadda inscription: *šem Azitawad ykn km šem šemeš vyrḥ* ‘May the name of Azitawadda endure forever like the name of the sun and the moon’ (Donner and Röllig 1964: 35-43, Younger 2000: 150), suggests that the verb *yinnón* in Ps. 72:17 has been miscopied for a paleographically similar *yikkón* (the letter *kaf* has been misread as a *nun*) meaning ‘to establish’.

All of this is academic for already in a Talmudic discussion about the name of the Messiah, it was Rabbi Yannai who citing this passage in Psalms proclaimed – according to the Aramaic principle *shma` garim* (i.e. *nomen est omen*) – that the Messiah's name was Yinnôn, like his *own* derived from Yannai (Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 98b). The verb in the imperfect tense became the nominal subject of the sentence and a new Hebrew name was born.

## Hen – A Misunderstood Foreign Term

I suggest that the so-called personal name Hen, written *lhn* 'for/to Hen' with prepositional *lamed*, in Zachariah 6: 14: 'The crowns shall remain in the Temple of the Lord as a memorial to Helem, Tobiah, Yedaiah and to Hen son of Zephaniah', was actually the borrowed Aramaic term *lahēn* meaning 'a (temple) steward' (Demsky 1981). Certainly, the name Hen could be a hypocoristic of the personal name Hanan, Hananiah or even Hanibaal. However, since Hen ben Zephaniah in 6:14 is substituted for Josiah ben Zephaniah in vs. 6:10, I proposed that *lhn* was his title, i.e. the steward in charge of the temple treasury, who was the recipient of the aforementioned donated crowns. *Lehen* is the Hebrew cognate of the Assyrian temple official the *lahhinu* and of the Aramaic official called *lhn* who served in the Jewish sanctuary at Elephantine in Egypt during the Persian period (5th century BCE). This term went out of use in the later Hellenistic period. It seems to me therefore that the word *lhn* here indicates Josiah's title or occupation as the Jerusalem Temple's treasurer, the appropriate address for the above donation, and is not an alternate Hebrew name as claimed by some and accepted by many medieval and modern commentaries as a legitimate personal name.

## Malachi – Naming an Anonymous Prophet

Some commentators of the Book of the Twelve Minor Prophets following the Septuagint, which reads in the first verse: ἐν χειρὶ ἀγγέλου αὐτοῦ 'by the hand of *his messenger*', see in the name of the prophet Malachi not a personal name, but rather the epithet 'My messenger'. This position would make the name Malachi, found only in the editorial superscription (1:1) of this small book, another example of a ghost-name created by a later editor's intent on identifying an anonymous collection of prophecies. The name is seemingly based on Malachi 3:1: 'Behold, I am sending *malachi*, literally *My messenger* (cf. Haggai 1:13), to clear the way before Me...As for the *angel* of the covenant that you desire, he is already coming' (Smith 1960: 9-11). Other than the two nouns *mal'ak* 'messenger'/'angel' and *mel'akah* 'work', derived from the root *lak*, there are no other nouns or verbs, nor other personal names in Hebrew from this root.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, the morphology of the name with a first person possessive pronoun is not common, whereas most biblical Hebrew names are verbal sentences with a third person Divine subject.<sup>2</sup> In light of these considerations, the name

<sup>1</sup> The late Prof Hanan Eshel pointed out to me the inscribed handle from Tel Arad written in a vulgar script that has been read, not without palaeographic problems, as the name 'Malachi' (Aharoni 1975:110, fn97).

<sup>2</sup> Of course, there are exceptions, such as the first person in such names as Shealtiel, meaning 'I have asked God' as well as the problematic Giddalti and Romamti-ezer (I Chr 25:4, 29,31), or in declined nouns e.g. El-Yeho-einai, 'My eyes are toward Yeho', which became a popular name in Second Temple times. In addition,

Malachi should be taken as another ghost-name that was created to identify an anonymous collection of prophecies. The phenomenon of anonymous collections of prophecies that have been editorially attached to other books has been recognized for Isa. 40-66, generally called Second Isaiah, or for Zach 9-14 called Second Zachariah.

### **Avigdor – A Reinterpreted Text and a New Identity**

While the above examples of ghost-names emanate from problems encountered in the biblical text, it is also possible that a particular ‘name’ is the result of a later interpretation suggesting a new meaning to a difficult text, such as the tribal genealogies. These genealogies, from an earlier social context based on tribal kinship, lost their historic relevance in the Second Temple period. To overcome this matter a new name with new meaning is intentionally created.

A case in point would be the late Hebrew name Avigdor, which is derived from I Chron. 4:18: ‘Yered the (eponymous) (clan-) *father* of (the *town* of) *Gedor*’. In a conscious effort to give new meaning to these archaic tribal genealogies, the Midrash, i.e. Rabbinic interpretation, found in the lineage of the tribe of Judah names that hinted to major figures in the story of the Exodus. This line of interpretation was supported by the fact that certain Judean clans, e.g. Caleb and Hur, were called after their namesakes mentioned in the Exodus story. The Midrash then assigned new identities to the names in the genealogies: Efrat was the code name for Miriam, Moses’ sister, Bitiah bat Pharaoh was identified as Moses’ step mother and Mered was Caleb. It was assumed that Moses too should be found in the cluster of these somewhat strange and no longer identifiable names. The Midrash identified Moses with the new name of Avigdor (Babylonian Talmud Megillah 13a). This innovative turn is noteworthy for it overrides the fact that this early genealogy in I Chron. 4:18 is that of the clans of Judah and not of Levi, Moses’ tribe. Moreover, it changes the meaning of ‘*avi*’, meaning here ‘clan father/chief’ located in the town with the toponym Gedor. Moreover, the new name Avigdor symbolizes the change in definitions of identity in ancient Israel from the earlier tribal and clan allegiances to the supra-tribal, national patterns of the Second Temple era.

### **Vashni, Ahian, Hotam, Abijah – Creating Names from Kinship Terms**

Biblical genealogies are replete with technical terms indicating kinship ties. Originally they helped the reader follow the intricate relationships recorded in this genre (Levin 2001). Subsequently, in post-biblical times these terms went unnoticed or were corrupted or just identified as uncommon personal names (Demsky 1993). Following a structural approach in studying biblical genealogies, I have identified several Hebrew terms distinguishing them from the proper names which they define. The more obvious ones are those like *bekhor(o)*,

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<sup>1</sup>Immadiyah, meaning ‘Yah is with me’ and <sup>2</sup>Immanuyahu, meaning ‘Yahu is with us’ are found on personal seals from the biblical period (Avigad and Sass 1997: 64-65). They are feminine equivalents of the first person plural <sup>3</sup>Immanuel (Isaiah 7:14), meaning ‘God is with us’.

i.e., ‘first son/born’, while the second son is noted as *vahašeni* or *mishšnehu*, literally ‘and the/his second’, or simply *ve’ahiv* ‘and his brother’. The sister mentioned in some of the patriarchal genealogies is listed last, regardless of her relative age vis-à-vis her younger brother (cf. ‘Miriam the sister of Aaron’, Exodus 15:20), and was identified by the term *‘a hotam* ‘their sister’. In several cases, some of these terms became personal names which I identify as ghost-names.

Following Rabbi David Kimhi (Radak), I Chron. 6:13 has been translated: ‘And the sons of Samuel, the eldest Vashni and Abiah’, i.e. not taking the kinship term *vashni* literally ‘and the second’, but rather as an alternate proper name for Joel, the son of Samuel, as in I Samuel 8:2. However, the distinguished Bible commentators Rabbi Solomon ben Isaac (Rashi) and especially Rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra (on Numbers 21:14) correctly read the term literally ‘and (the) second (brother)’.

Another example of a ghost-name can be found the vicissitudes of the term *‘ahi*, literally ‘brother’, but when following a name in the genealogies could serve as a kinship term indicating that that person *is* ‘the second brother’ of a previously mentioned referent. This is the case in I Chron. 7:3: Ben Helem [Bimhal] *ahiv*, who is the second son of Yaflet. Occasionally, the term *‘ahi* is corrupted. A case in point is the name Ahian (I Chron. 7:19) where we read ‘And the sons of Shemida: Ahian and Shechem and Likhi and Ani`am’. In my analysis of the genealogy of Manasseh (Demsky 1982), I noted that in the Chronicler’s version, the three major western clans that remained after the Assyrian conquest were 1) Asriel, 2) Hephher, represented by Milkah (Hamolekhet), the daughter of Zelophehad, and 3) Shemida. In the fuller tribal lists of Manasseh found in the Books of Numbers, and Joshua 17, they are listed in order #3, 5 and 6. Keeping this older list in mind, the Chronicler (ca. 400 BCE) presents Zelophehad as ‘the second’. If so, then I would expect that he would note that Shemida was also a sibling of the first rank. He could refer to him as ‘the third’, if he was counting further sequence (cf. I Chron. 2:13-15), or just say ‘his brother’. Therefore it seems to me that the unique name Ahian, seemingly the first son of Shemida, is actually a scribal error for *ahiv*, ‘his brother’. I read the letter *waw* for the letter *nun*, in either the Old Hebrew script or the later Jewish (Square) script.

For another misreading of the word ‘his brother’, now divided into two, see I Chron. 7:34: ‘The sons of Shemer: Ahi *and* Rohgah, and Hubbah and Aram’. Since Shemer (alternatively: Shomer) is the second son of Heber, mentioned above, we would have expected the word *ahiv*, ‘his brother’, to follow his name and read: ‘The sons of Shemer *his brother*: Rohgah, and Hubbah and Aram’.

Among the women mentioned in these patriarchal genealogies, there are those who achieved renown either as the metronym of a clan (Efrat, Maachah, Hoglah, Milkah, Serah) or as an historical personality in their own right as mentioned in the narratives (Rebecca, Achsah). As I said above, in a patriarchal genealogy these women are always placed last and defined in relation to their brothers by the term *‘a hotam* ‘their sister’. For example, in the tribal genealogy of Asher in I Chron. 7:32 we read: ‘And Heber begot Yaflet and Shomer and Hotam and Shua their sister’ (Demsky 1993). Even though the male personal name Hotam does appear once in I Chron. 11:44, it seems to me that here in the Asher list Hotam is a conflate or scribal error for the following *‘a hotam*.

There is no doubt that the biblical genealogies are complex and refer to all sorts of alliances that do not appear in the narrative, some of which might have been more illicit or otherwise banned. There is an interesting reference to such a complicated relationship in I Chron. 2: 24: ‘After the death of Hezron in Caleb-ephraiah, *Abijah*, the wife of Hezron, bore Ashhur, the father of Teqoa’ (New Jewish Publication Society translation). However in I Chron. 2:19 and again in 2:50 it is clear that Caleb had an alliance with Ephraim, expressed in marital terms, and with whom he has several offspring, Ashhur among them (Chron. 2:19; 4:4-5). In light of these genealogies with an explicit reference to Caleb marrying Ephraim, I propose that the verse in question should read: ‘After the death of Hezron, Caleb married Ephraim – the wife of Hezron *his father* – who bore him Ashhur the father of Teqoa’ (Demsky 1986). In this case, changing the assumed original kinship term *’abihu*, i.e. ‘his father’, to the proper name Abijah would seem to be an intentional attempt to cover up what might be considered an illicit marriage, even an incestuous alliance. Creating the feminine ghost-name Abijah was an elegant way of avoiding this possibility.

## Mondegreens

While all of these examples of ghost-names that I find in Scripture are either based on scribal error or the misunderstanding of foreign terms or alternately intentionally reinterpreting different literary genre, there is another complimentary onomastic phenomenon in creating names that were mispronounced or misunderstood in *oral* recitation or transmission.

The phenomenon of ghost-names in an oral context with a sometime whimsical tone has been noted. For instance, Naftali Kadmon (2000: 90), in a chapter dedicated to ‘Humour in Toponymy’, notes a case where unfamiliarity with the Arabic language led British mapmakers to repeatedly record the toponym Musharif, Musharifa, and Mushairifa for many places in what was Mandate Palestine (before 1948). Actually, these forms could be real toponyms meaning ‘outlook’, ‘view point’, ‘high place’, ‘height’, derived from the Arabic root *šarufa*. However, as Kadmon says, the mapmakers simply misunderstood their local Arab informants when asked to name the place would reply: *muš`arif* – ‘I don’t know’.

It is significant that this onomastic category has been identified, particularly in the sometimes accidental creation of names in the oral recitation of a misheard literary text. Some of these texts had a religious aura expressing a concept with an exalted meaning or using an archaic term. By making that word into a name the passage became comprehensible to the undiscerning ear. This universal onomastic phenomenon has been termed ‘mondegreens’, a term coined by the American writer Sylvia Wright (1954) based on a line in the Scotch ballad ‘The Bonnie Earl O’Murray’:

Ye Highlands and ye Lowlands,  
 Oh were hae ye been?  
 They hae slain the Earl Amurray (!)  
 and Lady Mondegreen [i.e., and laid him on the green].<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> I thank Prof Scott Catledge for bringing mondegreens to my attention.

Wright has even suggested a biblical example: ‘Surely Good Mrs. Murphy shall follow me all the days of my life’ based on Psalms 23:6: ‘*Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life*’.

Other examples abound, as in the rote recitation of The Lord’s Prayer (Matt. 6:9; Luke 11:2–4), which gave the phonetic distortion ‘Our Father who art in Heaven, *Harold* be Thy name’. The misheard name ‘Harold’ is strengthened by the proximity to the reference to ‘(Thy) *name*’ and the use of the archaic term ‘*hallowed*’ for ‘sanctified’. Furthermore, the phrase referring to a hallowed divine name is somewhat remote from common parlance. It is based on the Hebrew value concept of *kiddush hashem* – ‘the sanctification of God’s name’ as concretized in prayer (Holtz 1964).

In conclusion, I have brought together a small and overlooked group of biblical names found in Scripture that, for a better term, I call ghost-names, and related them to the so-called mondegreens, which are names that were created in oral transmission. Under close scrutiny, we find that the biblical names originally were not meant to be actual personal names, but rather formed accidentally or through misunderstanding. Some were the results of scribal error (Yinnon) or a misunderstood borrowed foreign word (Hen). Additional ghost-names were identified in the Chronicler’s genealogies that seem to be corrupted readings for terms of kinship (Vashni, Ahian, and Hotam) and not personal names at all.

However, since these names are found in the Bible, we must assume that some were created as a result of exegetical and literary considerations attempting to find new meaning in a no longer intelligible text (Avigdor, Abijah and Malachi). Ultimately, these names gained currency and were accepted as part of the reservoir of Jewish names.

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