

inMinistry Perspective

Name Changes in the Bible

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On July 1, 2002, Western Maryland College (WMC) in Westminster, Maryland, was renamed McDaniel College, much to my delight. It is nice to have a college bear my name.

I realize, of course, that the renaming had nothing to do with me. Of the 418 names proposed by the 2,100 of alums of WMC who participated in the renaming quest, the name selected was in honor of William Roberts McDaniel (1861–1942), who was associated with that institution for sixty-five years as student, alumnus, professor, vice president, treasurer, acting president, and trustee. Even though I did not participate in the renaming process, I am obviously pleased with the outcome.

Over the years The Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary has changed its street address, its zip-code, post office, motto, and logo. The seminary's sister institution has changed its name along the way from the "Pre-Theological Department" of EBTS to "Eastern Baptist College" to "Eastern College" to "Eastern University." As I contemplate the name change of the seminary to "Palmer Theological Seminary" my attention has been drawn to those name changes in the Bible that provide background information and inspiration for changing the seminary's name.

First, a look and several changes coming from religious revisionists. Baaliah, one of David's heroes (1 Chron 12:5) whose name was composed of the noun ba'al "lord" and yah (meaning, "Yahweh is lord"), was changed to Bealiah. The reason for changing

the first vowel was that the noun ba'al was also widely used as the name of the Canaanite god Baal. By changing the first a to e, the proper name Baal was changed back into the common noun for "lord." This same reasoning was behind the name changes of (1) Eshbaal "the man of the Lord" (or "the man of Baal") in 1 Chron 8:33 to Ishbosheth "the man of shame" in 2 Sam 2:8; and (2) Meribaal "hero of the Lord" (or "hero of Baal") in 1 Chron 8:34 and Meribbaal "the Lord contends" (or "Baal contends") in 1 Chron 9:40 to Mephibosheth "from the mouth of shame" in 2 Sam 4:4. The name changes in Samuel were clearly editorial revisions which were historically inconsistent. Though biblical and religiously motivated, these name changes provide no parallel to the seminary's pending name change.

Theologically significant name changes do appear in Hosea 1:6-8, where Hosea's daughter was named "Not-pitied" and his son was named "Not-my-people." But in Hosea 2:1,23 the names were changed to "My-people" and "She-was-pitied." Whereas the former names of the son and daughter were statements of fact about wanton Israel, the latter names were statements of promise of God's forgiveness and mercy. Similar name changes which transformed simple statements of fact into proclamations of promise are found in the Genesis stories about Abram, Sarai, and Jacob, and the Gospel narratives about Simon Peter.* These provide positive parallels for name changes.

The name Abram is widely recognized as a compound of 'ab "father" and ram "exalted," with the "father" referring to God (as in the name Abijah, meaning "Yahweh is my father.") But the ram of Abram may also mean "he departed," in which case the name Abram, meaning "father departed," would anticipate the command to Abram in Gen 12:1, "go from your country and your kindred and your father's house."

In Gen 17:5 Abram's name was changed to Abraham. Although a number of scholars are convinced that Abram and Abraham are just dialectal variations having the same meaning, I concur with Castell (1669) and Delitzsch (1887) who recognized that the raham of Abraham means "copious, plentiful" when used for a drizzling rain. The innumerable drops of water in a drizzling rain would be like the stars mentioned in Gen 15:5 ("look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them . . . so shall your descendants be") or the sand mentioned in Gen 22:17 ("I will indeed bless you, and I will multiply your descendants as the stars of heaven and as the sand which is on the seashore.") Thus, the name change from Abram to Abraham transformed a statement of fact ("father is exalted" or "father departed") into a statement of promise: the patriarch would become the "father of myriads."

This interpretation of the name Abraham is supported by a similar name change for his wife. According to Gen. 17:15, the name Sarai was changed to Sarah, with the promise, "she

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will become nations; kings of people shall come from her." Whereas most exegetes assume that Sarah is but an updated pronunciation of the more archaic Sarai, both meaning "princess," the name Sarah is actually the cognate of the Arabic word *tharrah* (phonetic spelling) meaning "to become great in number or quantity, many, numerous." The old name Sarai or "princess" was a statement of fact—an honorific if not a literal princess—but the new name was a statement of promise: the matriarch would become the "mother of multitudes" — including monarchs, whereby she would become a real royal mother.

The name change of Jacob to Israel in Gen 32:28 and Gen 35:10 provides another example of a statement of fact being changed into a statement of promise. The name Jacob was given to Rebekah's second twin because the child was born clutching the "heel" (Hebrew *'aqeb*, which appears as the *acob* in the name Jacob) of his first-born brother Esau (Gen. 25:26). But the name Jacob is also related to the Hebrew *'aqob*, meaning "deceitful." Esau lamented that Jacob lived up to his name: "Is he not rightly named Jacob? For he has supplanted me these two times. He took away my birthright; and behold, now he has taken away my blessing" (Gen. 27:36). Jacob's name was changed to Israel after his struggling and prevailing "with God and with men" (Gen. 32:28). Thus, both names, Jacob and Israel, provided simple statements of fact.

But, according to Gen 35:10, the change from Jacob to Israel was, in fact, a statement of promise: "So his name was called Israel. And God said to him, 'I am God Almighty: be fruitful and multiply; a nation and a company of nations shall come from you, and kings shall spring from you.'" Thus, just as Jacob had a double meaning ("heel" and "deceit"), so also Israel had a double meaning. The *Isra* of Israel meant "to prevail" (the cognate of Arabic *_araya*); and it also meant "to become great in number" (the cognate of Arabic *tharrah*, noted above with reference to Sarah). Consequently, the name changes of Abraham, Sarah, and Israel—as proclamations of promise—are theologically very significant.

According to John 1:42, Simon the brother of Andrew had his name changed upon his first encounter with Jesus: "[Andrew] brought

him to Jesus. Jesus looked at him, and said, 'So you are Simon the son of John? You shall be called Cephas' (which means Peter)"—and Peter means "Rock." The actual Aramaic name Cephas, meaning "Rock," survives only eight times: in Gal 1:18; 2:9, 11, 14; and 1 Cor 1:12; 3:22; 9:5; and 15:5. Elsewhere, in 156 verses, the Greek Petros (=Peter="Rock") has replaced the Aramaic Cephas. The name Simon meant "Obedient," and the compound name Simon Peter, which appears fifteen times in the Gospel of John and three times elsewhere, could be translated as "Obedient Rocky."

Adding to the complexity of Peter's names is the fact that he was called "Simon the son of John" in John 1:42, but "Simon son of Jonah" in Matt 16:17. But there is no disagreement in these verses when properly understood. The former identified Simon Peter's father, whereas the latter was a Semitic idiom which addressed Simon Peter's personality profile. Jonah means "a dove," thus Simon Peter was "a-son-of-a-dove" or "dovish," meaning at least these two things: he was harmless and innocent (Matt 10:16) and he was receptive to "the Spirit of God descending like a dove" (Matt 3:16, Mark 1:10, Luke 3:22, and John 1:32), which is confirmed by the last half of Jesus' statement to him, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven."

The "dovish" Simon bar Jonah became hawkish enough to cut off the ear of the high priest's slave; and the "obedient" Simon Peter then sheathed the sword as Jesus ordered him to do (John 18:10-11). As a matter of fact, Simon Peter lived up to his different names, even to the point of being obedient unto death (as told in the apocryphal Acts of Peter, 31-41). But beyond the legends and the facts was the proclamation of promise, "You are Peter (petros), and on this rock (petra) I will build my church, and the powers of death shall not prevail against it." Again, the shift in names produced promises for the people of God.

As in the first century and before, now in the twenty-first century and hereafter, a name change might well provide some promises for the future. Picking the name "Palmer" from the past has such possibilities. Others who personally knew Dr. Gordon Palmer will share why he was chosen to be honored in the renaming of the seminary.

In closing I address the etymology of the name Palmer by citing the opening lines of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*:

When April with his showers sweet
with fruit

The drought of March has pierced unto
the root . . .

Then do folk long to go on pilgrimage,
And palmers to go seeking out strange
strands,

To distant shrines well known in
sundry lands.

The "palmers" were professional pilgrims who, for centuries, visited sacred Christian sites in the Holy Land, especially in Jerusalem. Because they always carried a small cross made of palm leaves as evidence of their pilgrimage to Jerusalem they became known as "palmers." Many of these "palmers" professed poverty and supported their wanderings and charities through alms. Their charities included hospitals for the poor and almshouses, such as the one at Nottingham, England, (which was made possible by a land grant around 1160 that was confirmed by King Henry II and given recognition by the Pope). Thus, the "palmers" were involved in Christian social action well over a thousand years ago, and as pilgrims had a gospel to explore and to share for their whole world—from England to Egypt. Their palms constantly referenced the "Hosannas!" of Palm Sunday, their crosses were a reminder of God's gift on Good Friday, and their pilgrimage to the empty tomb of Jerusalem's Holy Sepulcher had affirmed the reality of Christ's resurrection.

The name Palmer, when properly interpreted etymologically and historically, promises to be a fitting symbol for a seminary committed to the spiritual and social dimensions of "the whole Gospel for the whole world through whole persons." Like the biblical name changes which were proclamations of promise, the transition from the descriptive EBTS to the honorific Palmer is filled with promises to make theological education all the more a pilgrimage of learning and spiritual formation. iM

* For a more detailed study of these names visit my web page (<http://www.ebts.edu/tmcdaniel>) and go to Volume II, Chapters 4 and 33.