THE SYMBOLISM OF NAMES IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

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A study of names in the Old Testament, of the symbolism associated with them and the literary effects which they exercise, begins with the recognition of one central fact, namely, that a large proportion of Hebrew personal names are intelligible sentences or phrases. A name like Jonathan meant "God has given"; Eleazar meant "God has helped". Both of these are verb phrases, with a past reference. We also find names which have the form rather of a prayer, a request: Ezekiel, "may God strengthen (this child)". Others have no verb, and take the form of a phrase like "The Lord is father" (Joab) or "Servant of the Lord" (Obadiah). There were also animal names, like Rachel ("ewe"); plant names, like Tamar ("palm-tree"), and names specifying physical or mental features, like Manoah (probably "generous"). Thus the names had meaning. They are not names which are intelligible only to the modern philologist with his historical interests; they were intelligible to the people who gave them and to the people who bore them.

Because this was so, we may very probably suppose that people's mental attitude to their names was very different from that of our contemporaries. Of the millions of men who bear common names like my own, James, or John, or William or Harold, not one in a thousand has the slightest idea of any meaning which it may possess. There are indeed exceptions: some small proportion of Margarets may know that the name means "pearl", and a famous biblical incident will have made most Peters aware that their name means "rock". But on the whole names in our society do not have intrinsic meaning in the way in which other words have meaning; and when it happens, as it does with many surnames, that the name coincides with a normal and common noun, it seems that our mechanism for understanding that it is a

1 A lecture delivered in the John Rylands Library on Wednesday, the 12th of February 1969.
surname blots out automatically its meaning as a common noun. Thus when we meet Mr. Smith we do not think of a blacksmith, and when we talk to Mrs. Stone we do not think about any geological object. On the whole, then, our personal names are lacking in the kind of intrinsic lexical meaning which is possessed by the other words of our vocabulary.

This does not mean that our choice of a name in modern society is meaningless. As is well known, there are very strong fashion-conscious and aesthetic elements which affect the choice of names; some of these trends can be seen in the statistics published each year from the birth notices in the columns of The Times. Moreover, one way in which the choice of a name has a kind of symbolism in our society is the tendency to choose a name because someone else already has this name. Children are named after their grandparents, for instance; the names of royalty have had a great influence upon the popularity of names; and the rise and fall of names like Winston or Marilyn is related to the fame of their most illustrious bearers.

This latter kind of name-symbolism, curiously enough, is largely absent from the Old Testament; in general, the names of the illustrious and of past heroes were not copied. In this respect the biblical period contrasts markedly with what later came to be Jewish practice, for in a later time names like Abraham, Moses, Solomon became common and have remained so until the present day, becoming in Western society prenames on a pattern of usage similar to that of the Christian "Christian name". In the Bible itself, however, this is not so. There is not a single Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Aaron, David or Solomon in the whole Hebrew text, apart from the original bearers of these names.1 The first person of really first-rate importance in the biblical story to bear a name which many other Israelites also bore was, so far as I can see, Joshua; a good six or seven other Joshuas are recorded. The only obvious competitor would be

1 E. G. Withycombe in Chambers’ Encyclopaedia, article "Name", vol. ix, p. 646b, says that "The primitive Semitic doctrine seems to have been that a man’s name in some way expressed his personality and that one name could therefore apply only to one individual." This is certainly not true of the central Old Testament period but might have some validity for the names of the illustrious of early and primitive times.
Joseph, whose name was borne by about four others recorded in the Bible; but of Joseph more in a moment, for he brings us to the names of the progenitors of the twelve tribes of Israel, who deserve some remark in particular.

The twelve tribes of Israel, as is notorious, can be counted in more than one way, and the names of their progenitors actually add up to fourteen. This is because Joseph, one of the twelve, had two sons, Ephraim and Manasseh, and each of these constitutes a separate tribe according to some sources. If you count Ephraim and Manasseh as separate tribes, omitting Joseph, you have also to cut out another name in order to keep the number at twelve, and this is done in different ways in different lists. This does not concern us further. Of the fourteen names taken together, the following are not used by any other person in the biblical text: Levi, Reuben, Naphtali, Zebulon, Dan, Asher and Ephraim, seven in all. Three of these occur as place names (i.e. names of particular cities, other than that of the tribal area): Dan, Asher, and Ephraim. Only Judah and Joseph received much imitation, to judge from the biblical text, with four followers each, many of them in the very late lists of Ezra and Nehemiah. Only two names were later borne by persons of distinction; these were Gad, the name of David's seer, and Manasseh, the name of the important king in seventh-century Judah. But there is, in addition, one thing in common to a number of those who bore as their personal name the name of one of the progenitors of the twelve tribes, and I do not know that this has ever been noticed before: a group of them all come from the same list, and that is the list in Ezra x. 20-43 of those who were punished for having married foreign wives. This list, 109 names in all, contains six persons with names identical with those of the tribal patriarchs. There is a Judah (one of four apart from the patriarch), a Simeon (the only one), two Manassehs (the only ones apart from the king of the name), a Benjamin (the only one apart from one in a list in Chronicles, where he is great-grandson of the patriarch Benjamin, 1 Chron. vii. 10) and a Joseph. I do not attach any great importance to this fact, and certainly do not wish to suggest that the adoption of a tribal name as a personal name was a sign of moral laxity; it fits in with and
corroborates what is already known, that this was a time when there existed some uncertainty about the true historical and legal limits of the Jewish people in respect of family and genealogy, and it possibly suggests the willing adoption of the old tribal names by just those whose position in other respects was likely to be in some doubt. But we have sought in general only to show that names were not usually or generally adopted because they had been borne by great men of ancient times; only at the end of the biblical period does this tendency come into operation. Curiously, Ishmael, which in the patriarchal story was the name not of an ancestor of Israel but of an ancestor of certain Arabian peoples, is a name more widely recorded for Israelites in the biblical text than the name of any of the progenitors of the twelve tribes (five examples, one of them in the list of men with foreign wives).

The name in biblical Hebrew, then, is unlike either our prename (Christian name) or our surname. It is unlike our surname in that the surname is predetermined and unchangeable, apart from the special cases of marriage (for women's surnames) and deliberate legal action. The Hebrew name is, so far as we can see, freely chosen and may indeed, in principle, have been created by innovation. I do not see that we can either prove or disprove this for the biblical period. In so far as many names were constituted by normal sentences or types like "God gave" or "may God guard", it is quite likely that the stock of possible names was never felt to be a closed or finite set, or (to put it another way) that the creation of a new name, one which had never been used before, was not perceived as an innovation but only as a variation within the given, and rather restricted, existing patterns. The limitation that existed was imposed by the kind of sentiments that were felt to be fitting for expression in names. The Hebrew name, secondly, was unlike our prename because most prenames, as has been pointed out, do not appear to their bearers to have meaning, in the sense in which meaning attaches to other words. It may be said indeed that many English surnames can be analysed for meaning, even if we grant that, as I pointed out above, we do not usually do this. But the effect of analysing an English surname for meaning (where it appears pos-
sible) and the effect of analysing a Hebrew name for meaning are two startlingly different things, and the difference expresses something of the literary ethos of the Old Testament. The meaning of a Hebrew name is for the most part deliberate; it is religious in large measure, and the emotions it suggests are the solemnity and the joyfulness of the confidence in God. In an English surname, on the other hand, if we try to inspect it for its meaning, the sense is surprising and its effect is mostly comic; it is only with comic intent that one tries to look for the meaning in Smellie, Merriweather, Ramsbottom and Maidenhead.

The fact that Hebrew names made sense, and that this sense was deliberate and solemn, is one basic reason why the Israelites developed a strongly etymological sense, which expresses itself at many places in the Old Testament where something is said about a name. The fact that Hebrew names are being etymologized is sufficiently evident to the reader of the Bible even if he has no Hebrew. For instance, when he hears (Gen. xxxii. 28) "Thy name shall be called no more Jacob, but Israel: for as a prince hast thou power with God and with men, and hast prevailed" (AV), or again (Gen. xxx. 6) "And Rachel said, God hath judged me, and hath also heard my voice, and hath given me a son: therefore called she his name Dan" (AV), it is transparent that some kind of etymological play upon or explanation of the name is being provided. Such etymological explanations are in fact an important structural feature of biblical style, and deserve some further discussion.1

Two remarks, therefore, about the sort of passage which has just been cited, the narrative passage which tells, let us say, of the birth of a child, the giving of his name, and some kind of phrase supposed to explain the name; or, sometimes, the changing of a man's name to another name, with an explanation of the new one; or, with names of places, the provision of an etymological explanation of it, like Beth-El because "this is the house of God" (Gen. xxviii. 17, 19). The incidence of these passages

lies, within the Old Testament, very heavily at the beginning; by far the most cases are in Genesis (so already Fichtner), and by the time we reach Deuteronomy the genre has practically disappeared. Within the following historical books examples continue to appear, but are sporadic and haphazard in their distribution. It is at the beginning of the biblical story, and notably in Genesis, that the incidence is heaviest.

The second thing is that many of these explanations of names rest in fact on very weak foundations. To say this is not to make the unfair criticism that they lack the resources of modern philological knowledge. No, quite apart from this, taken as explanations of names by popular etymology on the basis of Hebrew as it was actually known and used in the biblical period, the explanations are frequently of obvious weakness: they do not fit the forms of the names being explained, or the explanation fails to suit the narrative context, or there are contradictions between different elements in the explanation. Such weaknesses are immediately evident when Cain’s name is explained as from “I got a man” (qaniti) or Noah’s from “he will comfort us” (from naham) or Samuel’s from “he is lent” (ša‘al). The very important alteration of name from Abram to Abraham is provided with the thinnest of possible explanations (the element ham is connected with the word hamon “multitude” by Gen. xvii. 5, leaving the r hanging in the air without meaning), and the accompanying transition from Sarai to Sarah is not explained at all. In Genesis xxx. 20 the name Zebulon is explained in two different ways, firstly from the verb zabad “give” and secondly from the verb zabal, which is closer to the form Zebulon but is somewhat doubtful in meaning; one tradition has taken it as “honour” and another as “dwell” or “dwell with”.

The fact that names had meaning does not imply that the meanings ascribed to names are always right.

The explanation of this apparent discrepancy is this, that in attempting to deal with the names attaching to the earliest history the biblical traditionists had gone beyond the resources which

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1LXX αἰρετεί με ὁ ἄνηρ μου may be taken perhaps to indicate the former; Targum Onkelos has “the dwelling of my husband will be with me”, and similarly the Vulgate, followed by AV with “now will my husband dwell with me”.

their own linguistic experience provided for them. The names of the earliest stories were of different types from, or used lexical elements in different senses from, the usage familiar in Hebrew practice in historical times. The fact that attracted their attention to these particular names, namely the importance that must attach to what was so early and belonged to the world of the first fathers of the nations, coupled with the very strangeness of these names which made them call for an explanation, in other words the reasons that made them want to explain these names, were also facts that made the original meaning of these names inaccessible to them. Paradoxically, the fact that the average Israelite name in the historical period had a fairly transparent meaning which was publicly known, though it was the basis of the whole attempt at etymology, was also the reason why the attempt could not succeed. When one comes within the Bible to actual Israelite names, where the basis for the attempt was sound and where meanings could very simply have been stated, we find to our surprise that the attempt is comparatively seldom made. As Fichtner rightly remarks,\(^1\) in the period of the kings, when it would have been relatively easy for biblical writers to explain the names which occurred, "not a single name of any king, priest, prophet or other specially outstanding military commander is provided with an aetiological explanation".

At the beginning of this lecture I said that it was characteristic of Hebrew names that a large proportion of them were intelligible sentences or phrases. What we are now noticing is that this, though true of many names, is not true of all; there remained a proportion which were not easily intelligible or were not intelligible at all. Most of these come under several simple classes:

\(a\) There are foreign names, like Sennacherib or Nebuchadnezzar; these had meaning in their own language, but one had to know that language for the name to be intelligible. Some Hebrews actually bore foreign names, but it was not always known that the names were foreign. The name Moses, for instance, was an Egyptian name according to the judgement of many scholars, but the Bible explained it as if it was derived from a

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Hebrew word (Exod. ii. 10, from the verb *maša* "draw out (from water)).

(b) There are names which, if not exactly foreign, are descended from an earlier linguistic stratum and which therefore could not be rightly interpreted on the basis of current Hebrew usage during the central biblical period. Most names of the early biblical story, like Cain, Noah, Jacob, belonged to this group, which was also the group for which etymological explanations were most frequently attempted in the Bible.

(c) There remains a group of names of which it is difficult for us to decide how far they were intelligible or not. These are names for which ready explanations can be found not from the known Hebrew lexical stock but from the stock of cognate languages such as Arabic. Many such names are names indicating bodily powers or characteristics, like Shobek (Neh. x. 25), which can be related to the common Arabic verb *sabiqa* "come first in a race, run fastest" (cf. Ishbak in Gen. xxv. 2, the name of an Arabian tribe). The existence of names of this type can be construed in two ways. Firstly, the lexical elements they contain may have been genuine Hebrew which is simply not otherwise attested to our knowledge; in that case the names had the same kind of intelligibility as other Hebrew names. Secondly, there may have been lexical elements which were not used in other contexts than in personal names; in this case it must remain doubtful how far the meaning of the names in question was really known. If the latter is correct, then our statements about the intelligibility of Hebrew names have to be modified in this proportion.¹

From these remarks, we can go on to look at some more general features of the Hebrew concept of the personal name, and from this we shall return to consider one particularly crucial instance.

It is often said that the basis for the biblical explanations of

¹ For a consideration of the evidence of names in this group, see my *Comparative Philology and the Text of the Old Testament* (1968), pp. 181-4. Notice how large a proportion of such names is registered in the appendix under "Die profanen Namen" by M. Noth in his *Die israelitischen Personennamen* (1928), pp. 221-32.
personal names lies in the ancient Semitic concept of the name as something more than a mere word, something like an aspect of reality, or a form of power. Fichtner writes: "For the man of the ancient East effectual power resides in the word; and the name is not only a mark for the differentiation of different entities, but a determination of the substance of the entities named, whether they be persons, localities or objects. 'As some one is called, so he is.'" Assertions to the same effect can be found all over the scholarly literature, and citations need not be given.

Careful and analytic reflection, however, does something to diminish the solidity of this point of view and to show that it combines several elements which have to be separated in order to be understood properly.

Firstly, let us grant that many names are clearly conceived of as having power, as expressing or evoking the effectiveness of a person or reality. Granting that this is true of many names, it does not follow that it is true of all names. The names that have power are the names of powerful persons—gods, holy men, kings, great commanders—or the names of places of numinous character and influence. If a name is thought of as a name with power, it is because it is the name of an entity which has power. The long lists of personal names found in some sections of the Bible have their interest not in the power-possessing properties of these names but in the personal interrelations or behaviour of the people who bore them; the interest is genealogical, or territorial, or organizational, or historical (as in the case of lists of the returned exiles). The fact that names can be thought of as having power should not be generalized into a natural and universal function of all names.

Secondly, as we have already seen, many or most Hebrew names were intelligible or meaningful phrases. The analysis of names for meaning is a plain feature of the material. But, as we have seen, the pursuit of this etymological analysis was at its hottest just where the names were at their most opaque or uncertain. The sense of need to analyse a name is prompted primarily not by the numerous names the sense of which was very easy to see, like Ezekiel or Hezekiah, but by a compounding of

1 Fichtner, op. cit. p. 372.
the ancientness of the person or incident, the obscurity of the name, and the literary character of the relevant narrative. The interest in providing a meaning-analysis of the name is not directly related to the degree of its being power-filled. Absolutely central names like Abraham, Noah, Moses are etymologized, but so also are utterly peripheral ones like Zoar, Jabez, Beria, for some of which it is difficult for us even to guess why the name was considered important enough to warrant comment.

Thirdly, there is a difficulty in the principle that the name represents the character of the being and existence of the bearer. Of the names which clearly had intelligible meaning, a majority did not make assertions about the nature of the name-bearer at all; rather, the assertions were about God: they say that God has given this child (Elnathan, Nathaniel, etc.) or they pray that God will strengthen or preserve it (Ezekiel, etc.). Only in a very indirect and transferred sense can it be said that these names indicate the character of the bearer. There are indeed also the names of construct-group pattern, such as "servant of God" (Obadiah) or "gift of God" (Mattaniah); but these are balanced by the names which are of nominal-sentence pattern and do not say anything about the human bearer at all—names like Joab ("The Lord is father"), Eliam ("God is (the) Relative (lit. Uncle)" or "Am is God"). In names of this latter type both components in the sentence refer to God and there is no reference to the human bearer of the name. Thus for a large number of the theophoric names it is hard to see how one can maintain in any simple way the principle that "as someone is called, so he is".

The same is true of many of the single-word names. Some of these indeed do indicate physical characteristics or features of the personality. Many others, however, are plant or animal names. It might conceivably in some cases be held that the person was supposed to embody and exemplify the features specified in the name, e.g. that Deborah was to be a sort of bee and Rachel a sort of ewe, and that Tamar was to be tall and straight like the palm-tree. But even in these cases this is not a necessary interpretation and perhaps not even a likely one, while in some others it verges on the impossible. Was Caleb expected to embody the qualities of the dog? Was Huldah, the prophetess
active in Josiah's reign, really to be a mole-rat or badger, and was the prophet Habakkuk really to act out the existence of the garden plant *ocimum basilicum*?

We thus see that there is some difficulty in applying to actual Israelite names the general assertion that they specify essential features of the existence of their bearers. We need not doubt that the Israelites had some sensitivity to the *appropriateness* of the names of persons and were quick to notice such appropriateness when some occasion brought it to the fore; but in many cases the relation between the name and specific features of the person named may have been a somewhat casual, partial and accidental one, and the name in many cases failed to specify the essentials of the person's life and existence. This, we may add, is not unnatural seeing that most names were given soon after birth. Nicknames given in later years are a different matter; but, in so far as such existed (and they would appear to form a small minority among the known names), they also do not support the view that the name determined the way of a person's life; on the contrary, in this case it is the way of life which, after it has been observed by others, generates the nickname; the appropriate formula would then be "as a person is, so he is called".

This brings us to the case which is most often quoted in evidence for the idea that people must be as their names are, namely the case of Nabal, the man who combined foolishness and churlishness. In Hebrew *nabal* means "churlish, foolish", and 1 Sam. xxv. 25 says of him that "as his name is, so he is; Nabal is his name, and churlish folly (*nabala*)2 is with him". According to *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, this exemplifies the assertion that "a name is regarded as possessing an inherent power which exercises a constraint upon its bearer; he must conform to his essential nature as expressed in his name." At first sight this is very convincing. But on analysis objections soon appear. If this was so, and if Nabal meant "churlish fool", then Nabal's father or mother was greatly at fault in calling their child, presumably when still a small baby, by a name to which it

1 E.g. Fichtner, ibid. p. 372, without discussion.
2 But on the sense of this word see further below.
3 Article "Name", iii. 501b.
would have to conform with disastrous ill-mannered behaviour in later life. Would Abigail, a shrewd and businesslike woman with a quick eye to the main chance, have been content to marry a man whose name marked him out in advance for a life of disagreeableness ending in eventual disaster? Do we not have to consider some other possibility?

First, let us remind ourselves of the story. It goes back to the time when David, like others destined to become great statesmen, was serving an apprenticeship as something more like a gangster. The Philistine menace had meant that in the Judean hills little regular law and order prevailed, and David's band of men, themselves refugees from Saul's government, kept the peace and administered rough justice. Nabal was a very rich man and benefited from this, but was unwilling to pass over to David's men the appropriate protection money and sent them away with insults instead. David determined on an attack on Nabal's farm, and this was averted by Abigail, Nabal's wife, a woman of good understanding and of a beautiful countenance, who took a valuable convoy of presents to David to avert his wrath, and in speaking to him made the remarks about her husband's name which are our immediate concern. The rest of the story we can leave aside for our purpose; suffice it that in the end Nabal, having heard the story of the gift, took ill and soon died, smitten by the Lord. Abigail became David's wife.

Now there is, as I have suggested, an insuperable difficulty in the supposition that Nabal was so called by his parents, with the meaning "churlish fool", if in fact it was supposed that everyone must in his life express the reality suggested by his name. Perhaps, then, the reader may suggest, the name Nabal was not the name given to him by his parents but a name acquired from his contemporaries when the features of his character had become more apparent, in other words a nickname.

This is a reasonable objection, but it does not solve the problem. The first difficulty is that nicknames specifying bad personality traits are not common. Of the Hebrew names which express personal characteristics, whether bodily features or

1 Pedersen, *Israel*, i-ii. 252, says rightly "There is no doubt that it was a common wish to call one's children by good names to which good forces were attached."
character traits, there are several classes, distinguished already by Noth. Some have the nature of wishes: if one calls a child “strong”, this is an expression of a wish that it will be strong. Others are constatations of existing facts—for instance, colours of hair and skin, bodily shape. Another class consists of nicknames or mocking names (Spottnamen) which, according to Noth, in due course took the place of the original name and became the normal designation of a person. If the name says something nasty or unfavourable, as Noth says, the chances are that it is not a name given by parents but a nickname, such as Jashen “sleepy”.

But the number of names which are probable nicknames and which also specify bad personality features is very low; of Noth’s list on pp. 228f. only very few instances fall certainly within this category. Most of the names are in fact favourable, and this can include names with meanings like “proud” or “hot-tempered”, “eloquent” or “talkative” (assuming that the explanation of these names, commonly drawn from Arabic by Noth, is correct). Of names taken by Noth to have a sense like “fearful, timid”, one (Jerioth, 1 Chron. ii. 18) is perhaps a woman’s name, and if so its sense is less unfavourable than if applied to a man; and another, Nahbi (Num. xiii. 14) may well be explained in another way.²

Something similar can be said of other ancient Near Eastern naming practices. For Egyptian names Ranke³ gives a list of about 102 which indicate personal qualities and characteristics, but of these only about four state unpleasant qualities—the drunken, the bad, the unwilling, the rebellious. Of Accadian names, Gemser⁴ likewise recognizes that among names indicating character those which have an unfavourable sense are less common. He does list, however, a Nakimu (“miser”), a Šakiru (“drunkard”), a Bišu (“bad”) and—closest of all to the traditional interpretation of Nabal—a Saklu (“foolish”). Comparison with the onomastic processes of neighbouring peoples

2 Noth, p. 229, n. 12, derives from Arabic nakhḥb with the sense “fearful”; but one could consider also the sense “choice” on the same Arabic basis, and also derivation from a quite different root, cf. Huffmon, Amorite Personal Names in the Mari Texts, p. 189.
3 H. Ranke, Die ägyptischen Personennamen, ii. 177-80.
4 B. Gemser, De Bijeenkomst der persoonsnamen voor onze kennis van het leven en denken der oude Babyloniërs en Assyriërs (Wageningen, 1924), pp. 192 f.
thus shows that Nabal might have meant "churlish, foolish" as a nickname applied by his contemporaries, but that if so it is likely to have been one of a small minority of names which follow this pattern. In general, the biblical narratives do not give much evidence for the adoption of new names in Israel on the basis of developed character. The adoption of regnal names by kings, or of names relating to changed political loyalties (e.g. the cases of Jehoiakim and Zedekiah, formerly Eliakim and Mattaniah, 2 Kings xxiii. 34 and xxiv. 17), is a different matter. Of all the cases where a person has a change of name, it is doubtful whether any results from unfriendly observation of his or her character on the part of others. The instance of Naomi, who asked to be called Mara (Ruth i. 20) with the sense "bitter", is not a parallel, and in any case she was not in the sequel called by this name.

Moreover, there is another difficulty in the view that Nabal’s name was a nickname, applied to him when his developed character became obvious. The difficulty is that this view makes less sense of the actual story of Nabal and Abigail. We must, I think, suppose that in what she said about her husband’s name Abigail was saying something of some moment and profundity. "As his name is, so is he." If Nabal had got his name from his contemporaries because they thought that he was a churlish and foolish man, then Abigail in her saying is doing no more than repeat the facts as they were already generally known. She was not recognizing any inherent power in the name; she was only recognizing that his character was in fact just the character which had earned her husband his name in the beginning. The interpretation based on the nickname theory thus not only shows Nabal to have been foolish; it makes Abigail look a little foolish as well.

I suggest that we should look in another direction for a solution, and the first thing to realize is that the name Nabal did not mean "foolish, churlish".1 Once this is recognized the passage falls into a new light.

1 Since the above was written, I have found the same conclusion recognized by two other scholars: L. F. Hartman in the Encyclopedic Dictionary of the Bible (1963), col. 1589, and A. Guillaume in Studies in the Book of Job (1968), p. 114. But neither of them goes into the wider implications of this recognition.
Names containing the consonant sequence n-b-l are in fact not uncommon in the Semitic languages. In the Punic inscription Donner-Röllig no. 105 there occurs the name NBL, almost certainly the same name as that of the biblical Nabal, and here it is the name of the grandfather of the person who made the offering commemorated in the inscription. It is not likely that the pious writer of such an inscription would use for his own grandfather in such a context a name which was an opprobrious nickname coined by contemporaries to signify his boorish lack of manners, and this is an additional argument against the nickname theory. Moreover, names with n-b-l occur more widely; they are found in Arabic and in the Thamudean and Lihyanite inscriptions. A Thamudean text mentions a person whose name should perhaps be read as Hunb ha-Nabil (one could also consider the reading Nābil); a Lihyanite inscription has the name 'Anbal.¹

What then was the sense of the name Nabal? Several suggestions can in fact be offered which provide a happy alternative to the traditional sense of “churlish, foolish”.

(a) The name could come from a word meaning “fire” or “flame”. We have Accadian nablu, Ugaritic nblat, and Ethiopan näbälbal or näbal²; to this may also be related Arabic nabl “arrow”, a common word. The name would then be analogous to several other well-established Hebrew names connected with fire, flame and light, such as Uriel, Uri, Uriah, Jair, Neriah, Ner, Baraq, Lapidoth.

(b) It could come from a word meaning “send”, which would produce the familiar theophoric pattern as in “God has sent (this child)”. We can cite ancient South Arabian nbl “one sent”, along with Ethiopian tänbälä “be sent as an envoy”.³ This suggestion would gain strength from the further connection with the widespread Semitic root ybl or wbl “bring, carry”,

¹ See A. van den Branden, Les Inscriptions thamoudéennes, p. 181; G. Ryckmans, Les Noms propres sud-sémitiques, i. 135.
² Von Soden, Akkadisches Handwörterbuch, p. 698; Gordon, Ugaritic Textbook, glossary, no. 1599; Driver, Canaanite Myths and Legends, p. 158, n. 3; Dillmann, Lexicon linguae aethiopicae, col. 650.
³ Conti Rossini, Chrestomathia arabica meridionalis epigraphica, p. 183b; Dillmann, op. cit. col. 562.
found in particular in a number of Amorite names. There would then be analogies in Hebrew in names connected with sending like Shelah, Shilhi, Jabal, Jubal. It is possible that this explanation is ultimately the same as the previous suggestion, the sense "flame" or "arrow" having come from that of "send forth."

(c) Another possibility would be to interpret on the basis of the Arabic nabl, nabula "be noble, noble-minded, generous". If this option is followed, it might imply that the sense "noble", dominant in Arabic and present in the Hebrew personal name Nabal, and the sense "churlish, foolish", as found in the common Hebrew adjective, are the product of a semantic split in distant prehistoric times. Analogies for similar splits, sometimes producing a polysemy in one language, are not uncommon in the field of mental and moral qualities, e.g. Hebrew kesel, either "stupidity" or "confidence".

(d) Yet another possibility, and an attractive one if the name implied a description of character, would be to follow the interpretation offered by Ryckmans for the Lihyanite name 'Anbal and take the sense to be "skilled, clever" (Ryckmans habile). This would fit with the sense registered by Landberg for the Dathina nebel "wide-awake, nimble, alert, cute" (dégourdi, ingambe, alerte, débrouillard), the opposite of kasil.

Such then are some possibilities for interpretation of the name Nabal. It is not necessary for our purpose that we should decide quite definitely which of them was the original sense; let it suffice that it did not mean "churlish fool", and that there is ample room for suggestions that it meant something else. Nabal's parents therefore did not condemn their babe to become a predestined failure in society through giving him an ill-omened name, nor did Abigail at the time of her marriage look on the name as anything other than a normal and respectable one, just such as would come to be borne by a solid citizen of Carthage.

1 Huffmon, op. cit. pp. 154 f. Hartman, loc. cit., mentions Accadian niblu "scion". Roots with an initial consonant y or w are often found with a subsidiary form with initial n.
2 On this see my Comparative Philology, esp. pp. 173-81. Guillaume in his note cited above appears to hold that the two opposed senses of "noble" and " contemptible " existed both in Arabic and in Hebrew.
3 Landberg, Glossaire Dathinois, iii. 2737-8.
some centuries later. Of the four alternatives which I have men­tioned, however, I would consider the sense (b), i.e. a derivation from the sense "send", to be the most likely.

It is also possible that the original sense of the name Nabal was unknown to Abigail. In any case the name was originally a favourable or neutral one\(^1\); but some years of marriage to this miserly and cantankerous man made her think about his name in another way, and made her realize how close he came to expressing the quality which the Israelites normally designated as nabal. The story is thus not one of the simple outworking of the effects of a name which was evil from the beginning; it depends on the play of homonyms against one another; it is a recognition story, working through the discovery that a name is fitting for a person when it is understood in a sense other than that in which it was applied. What Abigail was doing, in other words, was almost the same thing as was done by the traditionists of Genesis and other books who, receiving names of persons in the tradition about early times, produced stories in which these names were given explanations based on later Hebrew usage.

Another point which connects Abigail's saying with the work of the etymologizers of names is often passed over without notice: her explanation of the name of her husband in fact goes far beyond associating with him the qualities of folly and churlishness which are designated in Hebrew by nabal. She does not say, "Nabal is his name, and nabal is what he is"; this is included and quite rightly, but she goes much farther than this. "Nabal is his name, and n'bala, disgrace, shamefulness, is with him, in his presence." The negativity and unfavourableness of the noun is very much stronger than that of the adjective. They belong in

\(^1\) The fact that the explanation through the sense "send" is neutral in respect of the semantic fields of "noble" or "clever" on one side and "foolish" or "churlish" on the other is one reason for preferring that explanation. The story presents no evidence in favour of a sharp reversal such as would be implied if the name had originally meant "clever" and had turned out to mean "foolish" or if it had originally meant "noble" and had turned out to mean "ignoble". Guillaume's interpretation, "Noble is his name, but ignoble is his nature", produces too drastic a contrast. A transition from a sense neutral in these respects to an unfavourable sense is more probable. This is strengthened by the fact, mentioned below, that Abigail's interpretation is in terms not of the adjective nabal but of the noun n'bala.
fact to rather different semantic fields. The adjective belongs to the field of "foolish", "ungenerous", "stupid" and "ungracious".¹ The noun, though cognate, belongs to a different field, which includes words like to'eba "abomination"; it is widely used of that very serious category of sins of which it is said that this "is not done in Israel", and many examples are cases of gross sexual outrage and breach of major commandments: for instance, it is found in the story of Dinah, Genesis xxxiv. 7; in the case of a bride found not to have been virgin, Deuteronomy xxii. 21; in the taking of the herem, Joshua vii. 15; in the attempted sodomy and the case of the Levite's concubine in Judges xix.-xx; and in the story of Tamar and Amnon, 2 Samuel xiii. 12. The suggestion therefore goes far beyond the contrast of foolishness and wisdom, and implies rather gross sin and utter wickedness. That Nabal later perishes through a divine stroke becomes more understandable.

Here, however, we must leave the instance of Abigail and her husband Nabal. In general, though it confirms the interest taken in names and their explanation by the biblical sources, it hardly provides evidence for the views sometimes expressed to the effect that names have power and that persons must be as their names require them to be. The view of names implied in Hebrew literature is more complicated and more self-contradictory than this rather simple philosophy of naming would suggest. It is compounded of a number of different features, which do not coincide with one another; these include the following: (a) most (but not all) names were intelligible and could be analysed for meaning; (b) some (but not all) names were regarded as powerful; (c) there was a strong folk-etymological interest, which was stimulated particularly by the alluring obscurity of the ancient names; (d) the interest in both genealogy and topography made the presence of names a very striking feature of the literature; (e) certain usages of the word "name", especially when used of God, come close to the sense of "being, presence", as many scholars have noted. No one of these characteristics however covers the whole field of Hebrew naming; all of them are partial and only in partial agreement with one another.

¹ On this see Trevor Donald, "The Semantic Field of 'Folly'", Vetus Testamentum, xiii (1963), 285-92.
The fact with which we started, namely that many Hebrew names are intelligible in the same way as other lexical elements, continued to have an effect even when the scene was transferred away from the Hebrew language and the soil of Palestine, and this effect can be followed in the use of the Septuagint in the Christian church. Experience in some European languages was not entirely dissimilar, and Greek was a case in point: many names like Demosthenes, Isocrates, Athenagoras, though they did not coincide with the Hebrew patterns of formation, did have in common with it the transparent meaningfulness of the units of which they are composed—Demosthenes, for instance, is clearly compounded of units meaning "people" and "strength". But the translators of the Hebrew Bible into Greek and other languages tried only very rarely and sporadically to offer translations of Hebrew names which would convey their meaning—Ζωή or Ζωογόνος for the name of Eve at Genesis iii. 20 was a happy exception—and transliterations, which conveyed the form of the Hebrew name, also obscured the sense and made the names seem barbaric. Since it was known that names, or some names, had important elements of meaning which were essential to the understanding of Scripture, the need to explain them generated a special form of literature, the Onomasticon, a list of biblical names with their interpretations. The value of the explanations furnished, however, was very mixed. By late times even Hebrew speakers can no longer have understood the mode of formation or the meaning of many biblical names, and the application of Hebrew explanations to Greek and Latin and other foreign words, and vice versa, did not help matters. While the belief in the divine inspiration of Scripture led men to believe that even long lists of names should have something to communicate, the original historical, genealogical and topographical concerns, for the sake of which the lists had been assembled, had come to be greatly diluted. The symbolism attached to most names in the Onomasticia is therefore, though ultimately generated by tendencies within the Bible itself, the more immediate result of unjustified generalization of these tendencies; the information they give is marked by commonplace and triviality and inspired too largely by curiosity.