

# Yahoo (Yahu): Notes on the Name of Swift's Yahoos

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The name *Yahu*, variant of *Yahweh*, component of numerous names in the Hebrew Bible, including the Hebrew form of Swift's own first name, *Yehonatan* 'the gift of Yahu,' may have been Swift's source for the name *Yahoo* in the fourth voyage of *Gulliver's Travels*. Swift could have meant the echo of *Yahu* in *Yahoo* as an ironic and tragic reminder that humans, said to be created in the image of *Yahweh*, are capable of degenerating to the moral depths symbolized by the Yahoos.

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Several critics, believing that Swift coined the name *Yahoo*, have speculated upon his creative process (Morley 15, 20; Clark 621-22; Buckley 270; Pyle). Others have thought that he found the name in the street cries of Dublin (Gallagher), in travel literature (Kermode; Moore), or in the Hebrew Bible (Kennelly).

John Robert Moore, beginning his search in travel literature, may have been the first to find a connection between the Yahoos and the Biblical name *Yahu*. He noticed that in the major dictionaries, "immediately below or very soon after 'Yahoo,' appears an entry dealing with 'Yahu — Same as YHWH....'" (182). This observation introduced Moore's research on a Nigerian people whom Captain William Snelgrave in 1734 had called *Yahoos*, using Swift's spelling, which was corrected by a later editor to *Yahus*. Moore was able to connect this name with the people's Hebraic origins:

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In the investigation of Nigerian culture, all variants of the name Yahoo have shown a strong association with the migration from the Temple at Elephantine [on an island in the Nile, site of a Jewish colony] where Jehovah was worshipped under the name of Ya'u or Yahu (14).

He concluded

if Swift had sought for a name which would suggest the degeneration of a great religious faith and a great national culture, it is at least possible that he might have found it ready to his hand in current accounts of a people living under more complete subjection to their masters than the Helots ever did — the African Yahoos, among whom (to the travelers) it seemed that, in spite of a tradition of a long-lost civilization, the most striking features of life were often human slavery, personal filth, inordinate lust, and the frantic grubbing for gold (185).

Finding no mention, however, of the African Yahoos in books published before 1734, Moore remained cautious: "Perhaps Swift had access to earlier printed references, ...perhaps he met with well-informed travelers...who returned with intimate knowledge of the Guinea Coast" (185).

Recently Laura B. Kennelly has gone directly to the Hebrew Bible for the origin of Swift's *Yahoo* and has suggested that it "may be a satiric allusion to Jehu," the Israelite commander of II Kings, chapters nine and ten, famed for his furious charioting and honored by sectarian reformers in the 17th century as a destroyer of wicked kings. Kennelly argues from the similarity of the names *Jehu* and *Yahoo* and shows, moreover, that Swift had used *Jehu* in other works as a derogatory metaphor for religious and political extremism.<sup>1</sup>

Thus, though taking different routes, Moore and Kennelly both suggest an Hebraic origin for the name of Swift's Yahoos. To their research I would like to add notes which support and perhaps add a few ramifications to the view that the Hebrew Bible is the source of the name *Yahoo*.

In the Bible *Yahu* is a variant of the tetragrammaton, *YHWH*, and of *Yahweh* (Anderson 2:409-11; Hillers 4n; Orlinsky 33n), the name agreed upon by scholars in the Christian era when they attempted to restore the vowel sounds of the tetragrammaton. *Yahu* appears most frequently in personal names such as Jehu 'He is Yahu'

(*Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* 2:817-19). The incorporation of *Yahu* in names can be accounted for by the extreme significance attached to personal names in the ancient world (*IDB* 2:408). The essence of a person was captured in the name (*nomen est omen*). Indeed, when a radical change occurred in a person's life, a new name was deemed appropriate (cf. Abram, Genesis 17; Jacob, Genesis 32; and Saul, Acts 13:9). (Walter Shandy was perhaps exaggerating this Biblical attitude when he became obsessed with choosing the right name for Tristram).

In view of the attribution of moral significance to personal names it is not surprising that *Yahu* appears in more than 100 different Biblical names, such as *Isaiah*, *Jeshua*, *Joshua*, and *Jesus*, 'Yahu is salvation' (*IDB* 2:731, 867, 988, 869). The frequency of names incorporating *Yahu* is multiplied by the fact that many of them appear repeatedly. *Azariah* 'Yahu has helped,' for example, serves as the name of 25 different persons (*IDB* 1:324-25). *Yahu* appears in uncommon names — *Ismachiah*, 'Yahu sustains' (2:750); *Jeberechiah*, 'Yahu blesses' (2:807) — as well as in familiar ones — *Joab*, 'Yahu is father' (2:907); *Joel*, 'Yahu is God' (2:925); *Josiah*, 'Let Yahweh give' (2:996); *Micah*, 'Who is like Yahu?' (3:369); *Nehemiah*, 'Yahu has comforted' (3:533); and *Jehohanan* and other forms translated as *John*, 'Yahu has been gracious' (2:810-11).

The history of *Jehu* in II Kings, chapters nine and ten, contains many examples of this naming practice. About 842 B. C. *Jehu*, 'He is Yahu' (*IDB* 2:817-819), son of *Jehoshaphat*, 'Yahu judges' (*IDB* 2:815), became the leader of a religiously motivated rebellion against the royal house of *Omri* in Israel. Israel's king, *Jehoram*, 'Yahu is high' (*IDB* 2:971-73), a son of *Ahab*, was wounded in a military campaign against Syria and withdrew to *Jezeel* to recover. *Elisha* seized this opportunity and sent a son of the prophets to *Jehu*, a commander of the Israelite army, to anoint him king of Israel in the name of *Yahweh*. *Jehu* told the other commanders what had happened, they proclaimed him king, and he set out for *Jezeel*, where *Jehoram* and his visitor, the king of Judah, *Ahaziah*, 'Yahu has grasped' (*IDB* 1:66), came out in separate chariots to meet him. *Jehu* killed *Jehoram*, and his men chased and mortally wounded *Ahaziah*. After ordering *Jezebel*, the Queen mother,

thrown from an upper window, Jehu assassinated all Ahab's family in Samaria, about seventy persons. One of the adherents of Jehu, Jehonadab 'Yahu is liberal,' 'Yahu is noble,' or 'Yahu has impelled' (*IDB* 2:964), assisted Jehu in the "extermination of both the cult and the worshipers of Baal" (*IDB* 2:818).

The history continues with events in the southern kingdom of Judah (II Kings 11-12). After Ahaziah was killed by Jehu's followers, he was survived in Judah by his mother, a daughter of Ahab and Jezebel named Athaliah, 'Yahu is great' (*IDB* 1:306). Athaliah illustrates the difficulty of living up to one's name, for she followed her mother Jezebel in worshipping Baal instead of Yahweh. When her son died at the hands of the Yahwists in the North, Athaliah led a Baalist coup in the South, destroyed most of the royal family of Judah, and assumed the throne herself. An infant son of Ahaziah named Jehoash 'Yahu gives' (*IDB* 2:909) was saved by an aunt named Jehosheba, 'Yahu is abundance' (*IDB* 2:816), wife of the high priest Jehoiada, 'Yahu knows' (*IDB* 2:813). Jehoiada later led a Yahwist revolution against Athaliah and made Jehoash king. After reigning 40 years Jehoash was succeeded by his son Amaziah, 'Yahu is strong' (*IDB* 1:104).

Swift of course knew Hebrew, he owned a Hebrew Bible,<sup>2</sup> and he probably knew about the Hebraic naming practice just discussed, since his own first name, from *Yehonatan* 'the gift of Yahu,' was the product of it (Zirker 967-68). In addition, in Gulliver's fourth voyage Swift calls attention to a peculiarity of the Houyhnhnm's language that is very similar to this naming practice. In order to denote evil, the Houyhnhnms combine *Yahoo* with other words:

I KNOW not whether it may be worth observing, that the *Houyhnhnms* have no Word in their Language to express any thing that is *evil*, except what they borrow from the Deformities or ill Qualities of the *Yahoos*. Thus they denote the Folly of a Servant, an Omission of a Child, a Stone that cuts their Feet, a Continuance of foul or unseasonable Weather, and the like, by adding to each the Epithet of *Yahoo*. For Instance, *Hhnm Yahoo*, *Whnaholm Yahoo*, *Ynlhmnawihlma Yahoo*, and an ill contrived House, *Ynholmhnmrholnw Yahoo*" (Swift 275).

Earlier, Gulliver reported that diseases were "called *Hnea Yahoo*, or the *Yahoo's-Evil*" (262). When these expressions are compared with the structure of certain Hebrew names — *Hnea Yahoo* with *Yehonatan*, for example, or with its equivalent, *Netan-yahu* (Kolatch 249), 'Yahoo's-Evil' and 'Yahu's gift' — the Houyhnhnm procedure appears to be semantically and rhetorically the ironic opposite of the Hebrew naming practice but structurally its near equivalent.

If the name *Yahu* from the Hebrew Bible should happen to be the source of *Yahoo*, what could have been Swift's point? Not, certainly, to show any disrespect to the name of the Hebraic-Christian deity, but perhaps to fashion the 18th century's most startling version of the ancient theme, the corruption of the best is the worst. Since Ricardo Quintana's *The Mind and Art of Jonathan Swift*, readers have known that all Swift's satires somewhere invoke a negative philosophy of history, the idea that humanity is gradually deteriorating instead of improving. Ralph E. Hitt later devoted an article to "Antiperfectionism as a Unifying Theme in *Gulliver's Travels*," Frank Brady reexamined the theme in 1978 (355-59), and recently Deborah Wyrick reemphasized "Swift's perpetual anger at the course of corruption traveled by human history, be it individual, linguistic, literary, political, or economic"(68). Nor was Swift the only adherent of this moral vision in the 17th and 18th centuries. William Beveridge, Bishop of St. Asaph, warned that sinfulness "razeth out the image of God, and stampeth the image of beasts upon us," and Henry Bullinger declared that through sin men who once were "like unto God [cf. Yahu] made themselves brutish [cf. Yahoo]"(quoted in Frye 212, 208). The echo of *Yahu* in the name of the Yahoos could be a concise summary of this theme, concentrating in a name Swift's belief in mankind's degeneration through sin.<sup>3</sup> Had not Swift composed his own justly famous epitaph, Wordsworth's lines would have served the purpose well:

Have I not reason to lament  
What man has made of man?

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>I am indebted to Dr. Kennelly for providing me a copy of this paper in an earlier form prior to its publication.

<sup>2</sup>Hebrew was one of the four statutory subjects at Trinity College (Ehrenpreis 1:57). Swift later had access to the Hebrew scriptures in Bishop Walton's Polyglott Bible of 1657, which appears on the shelf-list of books Swift was arranging in 1715 when moving into the Deanery of St. Patrick's (LeFanu 13).

<sup>3</sup>Robert Frost in "The Witch of Coos" may also have used the corruption of a name to signify the degeneration of the name-bearer and his family. Perhaps the name *Toffile Ladgway* was *Theophile La Joie* in the family' earlier and better days. (I owe this suggestion to Randall Jarrell, School of Letters, Indiana University, summer 1952).

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