

# Names in the Hebrew Bible

Herbert Barry III

*University of Pittsburgh*

Jared J. Jackson

*Pittsburgh Theological Seminary*

The Hebrew Bible contains more than a thousand names given to more than two thousand individuals, less than 10% of whom are females. The majority of women are identified merely as the wife, concubine, daughter, mother, or sister of a man. The twelve patrilineal tribes and genealogies of fathers and sons contributed to the preponderance of males. Ten names are ambisexual, shared by both males and females. Two books, 1 Chronicles and Genesis, contain the largest numbers of people with ambisexual names.

---

## Components of the Hebrew Bible

The Hebrew Bible consists of three parts. The first part, the Torah (Law), includes Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy (the Pentateuch). The second part is known as The Prophets. The books of Joshua, Judges, I and II Samuel, and I and II Kings comprise the former prophets; the books of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel comprise the major prophets and Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi are the minor prophets. The third part contains all the other books, collected as The Writings: Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Ruth, Song of Songs, Qoheleth (usually called Ecclesiastes), Lamentations, Esther, Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah, and I and II Chronicles.

These three parts contain a total of 39 books. Jewish tradition has emphasized the five books of the Torah and accepted either 17 or 19 additional books.

## Personal Names in the Hebrew Bible

A concise list of the names of individuals in the Bible was compiled by Rowley (1968). A more extensive list by Odelain and Segineau (1981) includes a list of the females.

*Names* 55.4 (December 2007): 372-378

ISSN: 0027-7738

© 2007 by The American Name Society

More than a thousand different names are contained in the Hebrew Bible. The names identify more than two thousand different individuals because several hundred names are shared by two or more different people. The multiple individuals are predominantly males. A few names are shared by ten or more males.

The majority of the names of persons appear only once, in a single verse. These briefly-identified individuals are usually components of a genealogy. Some of them are identified as the father or the son of a more prominent person. The most prominent individuals normally have a name that is not shared with others.

The twelve tribes of the ancient Hebrews were patrilineal descent groups. The members of each tribe shared a special affiliation based on a belief in a common ancestor. The tribal affiliation is documented with the aid of genealogical records of fathers and sons, usually omitting mothers and daughters. Accordingly, less than 10% of those named are females. Many women are identified as a wife or concubine of a man. Other women are identified as the mother, sister, or daughter of a man.

There are many male but very few female characters whose deeds are heroic or villainous. Exceptional heroines are the title individuals in the Books of Ruth and Esther. Others are Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, Leah, and Tamar in the book of Genesis, and Deborah in the book of Judges. Jezebel (1 Kings 16:31) is a villainess.

An additional reason for the more numerous males than females is that the narratives emphasize warfare, government, and public worship of God. Men dominated these aspects of life. Women dominated the domestic life of the family and children, which is described seldom and then only briefly in the Hebrew Bible.

Each name given to a person in the Hebrew Bible reproduces a common noun or phrase in Hebrew. Many names given to individuals contain one of the Hebrew characters that refer to God, such as *el*, *jo*, and *ah*. Names of males include *Nathaniel*, *Jonathan*, *Elnathan*, and *Elijah*. Names of females include *Jochebad* and *Delilah*.

#### Ten Ambisexual Names in the Hebrew Bible

Ambisexual names are defined as the same name in written Hebrew shared by one or more males as well as one or more females in the

### 374 Names 55.4 (December 2007)

Hebrew Bible. Ten ambisexual names are listed below in English translation. These are accompanied by brief biographical information on each of the individuals who bore these names, along with the book, chapter, and verse that records the first occurrence of each name. (The chapter and verse numbers sometimes differ from those in the English translation, but usually by no more than a single verse.)

**Abihail:** 2 females, 3 males. (1) Wife of Abishur, 1 Chr. 2:29. (2) Wife of Rehoboam, 2 Chr. 11:18. (3) Father of Zureiel, Num. 3:35. (4) Son of Huri, 1 Chr. 5:14. (5) Father of Queen Esther, Est. 2:15.

**Abijah:** 6 males, 1 female. (1) Son of Samuel, 1 Sam. 8:2. (2) Son of Becher, 1 Chr. 7:8. (3) Son of Jeroboam, 1 Kgs. 14:1. (4) Priest, head of eighth course, 1 Chr. 24:10. (5) Priest who sealed the covenant, Neh. 10:18. May be the same as (4). (6) Son of Rehoboam, 2 Chr. 11:20. In 1 Kgs. 14:31 he is called Abijam. (7) Mother of Hezekiah, 2 Chr. 29:1. Called Abi in 2 Kgs. 18:2.

**Athaliah:** 1 female, 2 males. (1) Daughter of Jezebel and mother of Ahaziah, 2 Kgs. 14:31. (2) Son of Jeroboam, 1 Chr. 8:26. (3) Son of Elam and father of Jeshaiah, Ezra 8:7.

**Ephah:** 2 males, 1 female. (1) Son of Midian, Gen. 25:4, but this may be a tribe rather than a person. (2) Son of Jahdai, 1 Chr. 2:47. (3) Concubine of Caleb, 1 Chr. 2:46.

**Gomer:** 1 male, 1 female. (1) Son of Japheth, Gen. 10:2. (2) Wife of Hosea, Hos. 1: 3.

**Hushim:** 1 male, 1 female. (1) Son of Dan, Gen. 46:23. (2) Wife of Shaharaim, 1 Chr. 8:8.

**Maacah:** 4 males, 5 females. (1) Son of Nahor, Gen. 22:24. (2) King of Gath, father of Achish, 1 Kgs. 2:39. Also called Maoch in 1 Sam. 27:2. (3) Father of Hanan, 1 Chr. 11:43. (4) Father of Shephatiah, 1 Chr. 27: 16. (5) Daughter of Talmai, king of Geshur, 2 Sam. 3:3. (6) Mother of Abijam, 1 Kgs. 15:2. (7) Concubine of Caleb, 1 Chr. 2:48. (8) Sister (and wife?) of Machir, 1 Chr. 7:15-16. (9) Wife of Jeiel, 1 Chr. 9:35.

**Mehetabel:** 1 male, 1 female. (1) Father of Delaiah, Neh. 6:10. (2) Wife of Hadar, Gen. 36:39.

**Noadiah:** 1 male, 1 female. (1) Levite, son of Binnui, Ezra 8:33. (2) Prophetess, Neh. 6:14.

**Timna:** 2 males, 2 females. (1) A chief of Edom, Gen. 36:40. (2) Son of Eliphaz, 1 Chr. 1:36. (3) Concubine of Eliphaz, Gen. 36:12. (4) Sister of Lotan, Gen. 36:22.

#### Six Seemingly Ambisexual Names in the Hebrew Bible

Three names—*Mahlah*, *Oholibamah*, and *Shelomith*—are uncertain but possibly ambisexual.

**Mahlah.** (1) Daughter of Zelophehad, Num. 26:33. (2) Child of Hammolecheth who was sister of Gilead. 1 Chr. 7:18.

**Oholibamah.** (1) Daughter of Anah, Gen. 36:2. (2) One of the chiefs descended from Esau, Gen. 36:41. Other chiefs mentioned here were males.

**Sholomith.** (1) Daughter of Dibri, Lev. 24:11. (2) Daughter of Zerubabel, 1 Chr. 3:19. (3) Son of Josiphiah, Ezra 8:10. (4) Son of Izhar, 1 Chr. 23:189. (5) Son, apparently of Rehoboam, 2 Chr. 11:20. Martin Noth (1928, 39, 165) claims, with textual support, that when the name refers to a man it is probably an error for the male name Shelomoth instead of Shelomith.

Three names, shared by a male and female in English language translation, contain a different character in Hebrew. These names—*Noah*, *Puah*, and *Shua*, therefore are not ambisexual by our definition. The male Noah is a survivor of the flood, Gen. 5:29. The female Noah is daughter of Zeloyehad, Num. 26:33. The female Puah is a midwife, Exod. 1:15. The male Puah is son of Dodo, Judg. 10:1. The male Shua is father of Judah's wife, Gen. 38:2. The female Shua is sister of Hotham and daughter of Heber, 1 Chr. 7:32.

#### Attributes of the Ambisexual Names

The ten ambisexual names in the Hebrew Bible were given to a total of 23 males and 16 females. Six of the ten ambisexual names—*Abijah*, *Athalia*, *Ephah*, *Maacah*, *Mehetabel*, and *Noadiah*—contain the component *ah* (~*el*), referring to God, the creator of both males and females.

None of the 39 individuals given an ambisexual name is particularly prominent; many are mentioned in only a single verse and most are identified as a relative of another person.

Of the 23 males, 14 are identified as a son of another male, four as the father of another male, and one as the father of a female. The four

### 376 Names 55.4 (December 2007)

remaining males have an independent status. Two, both named Abijah, are priests (they may be the same person). One, Maacah, is a king but he is also indentified as a father; another, Timna, is a chief.

The 16 females given an ambisexual name have more diverse connections with other persons. Six are wives, three are concubines, two are mothers, two are sisters, and two are daughters. The remaining female, Noadiah, is a prophetess.

Most of the males given an ambisexual name are connected with another male who is also briefly identified, such as in a genealogical list. Several of the males are connected with a much more prominent character. Abijah is a son of Samuel, the title character of two books. Other males named Abijah are a son of King Jeroboam and a son of King Rehoboam. A male named Athaliah is another son of King Jeroboam. Hushim is a son of Dan, who in turn is a son of Jacob. A male Abihail is the father of Queen Esther.

Six of the 16 females given an ambisexual name are connected with a much more prominent character. Abijah is the mother of King Hezekiah. Ephah and Maacah are concubines of Caleb, who is a subordinate of Moses. Gomer is wife of Hosea, who is the first of the twelve minor prophets. Abihail is wife of King Rehoboam. Athaliah is a daughter of Jezebel.

For both males and females, the majority of individuals with ambisexual names are found in only two books of the Hebrew Bible—1 Chronicles and Genesis. Of the 23 males, nine are found in 1 Chronicles and four in Genesis; of the 16 females, seven are found in 1 Chronicles and two in Genesis. Both books include extensive genealogical lists. The ten ambisexual names in the Hebrew Bible, while a small number, make up a substantial proportion of the names of females. The 16 females given an ambisexual name constitute more than 10% of the total number of females. Odelain and Segineau (1981, 418-420) list fewer than 160 females in the Hebrew Bible.

#### Individualism and Collectivism in the Hebrew Bible

While each person is an individual, at the same time almost everyone is a member of a group, a family, a community, and a nation. Hofstede (2001) notes that there can be an emphasis on either individualism or collectivism, depending on a person's cultural membership.

An emphasis on individualism is indicated by the large number (more than a thousand) of different names of people in the Hebrew Bible.

Comparable texts such as the Christian New Testament and the Muslim Koran generally contain a much smaller number of names.

The names of some of the most prominent people in the Hebrew Bible are not shared with any other person. A larger number of unique names are mentioned only once, often in a genealogical list. These briefly-identified people contribute to the emphasis on individualism. Some names are shared by multiple people, but the same name is seldom shared by father and son, by grandfather and grandson, or by other close relatives. The individuals with the same name are usually in different books of the Hebrew Bible or at least in different chapters of the same book.

The diversity of names enabled a single name for each person to persist throughout the history encompassed by the Hebrew Bible. There was no need to develop surnames or middle names because members of the same family usually were given unique names. There was no development of the same popular name given to a large proportion of the population, such as the names *John* and *Mary* in England several centuries ago.

Collectivism is expressed by the simple compilation of names of many people. The Hebrew Bible records the names of more than two thousand people as well as the collective history of all twelve patrilineal tribes. It identifies their common ancestry and their collective action in escaping from Egypt, conquering Palestine, and establishing a great kingdom; it preserves the common heritage after King Solomon's sons established two rival kingdoms and after exile in Babylon.

Most names of people are divided into groups. One group is given exclusively to boys, the other exclusively to girls. Ambisexual names, shared by males and females, express individualistic divergence from the customary collective behavior. The existence of ambisexual names in the Hebrew Bible therefore is an expression of individualism. The Hebrews did not appear to develop two different sets of names, exclusively applied to males and females. Although nouns in Hebrew are marked as masculine or feminine, it was acceptable to give the same name to both males and females. Ambisexual names occurred frequently in the long history of the Hebrews and appear to be continuing today. A number of current Israeli names, including *Adie*, *Amit*, and *Noah*, are given to both males and females (Sarah Angrist, personal communication).

Alternatively, it is possible that the writers and compilers of the Hebrew Bible did not intend to include ambisexual names. The few that occur might have been mistakenly given to one or more individuals of both genders. The names shared by one or more males and females were in different books or in different portions of the same book.

Evidence against this possibility is that the ten ambisexual names contain the larger numbers of 23 males and 16 females. The writers and compilers of the Hebrew Bible modified the texts during many years. There were many opportunities to make the individuals who shared the same name uniformly male or female if that were an important purpose.

The contents of the Hebrew Bible, then, express both individualism and collectivism. The 39 books are diverse and include legends, laws, history, biography, poetry, and proverbs. The conflict between individualism and collectivism is expressed by rebellion alternating with conformity. Adam and Eve disobeyed their Creator by eating the fruit of the tree of knowledge. The Hebrews accepted the Covenant as God's chosen people and were led by Moses out of Egypt. They subsequently rebelled against Moses and against God. The twelve tribes united in conquering Palestine and establishing a great kingdom. They soon divided into two antagonistic kingdoms. Through organizing and perpetuating this culture, the Hebrew Bible contributes greatly to collectivistic unity.

#### References

- Hofstede, G. 2001. *Culture's Consequences*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Noth, M. 1928. *Die Israelitischen Personennamen im Rahmen der Gemeinsemitischen Namengebung*. Stuttgart: Kohlhammer.
- Odelain, R., and Segueineau, R. 1981. *Dictionary of Proper Names and Places in the Bible*. New York: Doubleday.
- Rowley, H. H. 1968. *Short Dictionary of Bible Personal Names*. New York: Basic Books.