And Adam Gave Names – A Consideration of Name-Lore in Antiquity*

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THE SOURCE OF THE QUOTATION which serves for my title has already been recognized, I take it, by most of you. Its wording suggests – though this I hasten to deny – that I am about to deliver a sermon, but there is certainly the suggestion of a text about my title, and I readily admit that it is from the King James Bible, and, in particular, from the second chapter of *Genesis* and the twentieth verse – "and Adam gave names."

What especially interests me about this quotation – in connection with the American Name Society – is that I can use it as a text to claim for our especial subject-matter a most ancient, and – I may think – a most honorable origin. For, note, the first man was also the first giver of names. Note also that in the Biblical narrative this is his first recorded activity. To be sure, immediately after his creation he doubtless breathed, looked about him, and moved his limbs. But these are taken for granted and are not noted down. The other was of sufficient significance for record – certainly the first intellectual action. Before he composed a poem, or wrote a scholarly article, or held a committee meeting, Adam gave names.

I now enter into an area where I scarcely dare tread. If Adam was the first to give names, who was the first to be interested in names and thus to be our first potential member? Here I call upon you to remember that this second chapter of *Genesis* forms part of what is known as the Jehovistic version, which is characterized by a delightfully anthropomorphic conception of the Deity. In the nineteenth verse, then, it is recorded, "And out of the ground the Lord God formed every beast of the field, and every fowl of the air;

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and brought them unto Adam to see what he would call them." This interest in what name Adam would give has always seemed to me, I am bound to admit, an attribute of the Lord which, as President of the American Name Society, I find particularly charming.

Now I am not going to require of you a literal acceptance of *Genesis*. But I would point out that this second chapter offers to us, as onomatologists, certain subjects for thought. There is, for instance, the most troublesome philosophical question of the distinction between proper name and common nouns. This has been of much concern to logicians, such as Mill, and has been of interest to our own member Professor Pulgram. But in the Garden of Eden, I maintain, this problem did not exist, because each male animal and each female was unique. When the Lord God brought to Adam a certain tawny and long-toothed beast of the field, and said, "What are you going to call this one, Adam?" and Adam said, 'Lion" then (there being only *one* lion) the sounds uttered by Adam must have been at once, I take it, a common noun and a proper name. In the jargon of logicians, the class consisted of only one example. Whether this commentary will prove of any use to linguistic anthropologists, I doubt – but, in any case, I now pass on.

In less speculative vein, as indicated by my sub-title, my topic this evening is concerned with the attitudes in what may vaguely be termed "antiquity" as regards place names. Taking advantage of the conventions of the presidential address, I shall range widely through the Hebrew, Greek, and Roman periods, but at the same time many of my citations will be from literary documents with which you may all be assumed to be familiar.

First, I would point out a fact that is not, I think, widely known among modern students of toponomy, that is, that in the classical period whole works – place-name books – were written. We have, for instance, references to Sostratus's *Second Book of Rivers*, to Timotheus's *Eleventh Book of Rivers*, and to Decyllus's *Third Book of Mountains*, and these authors dealt with the names.

Nevertheless, I think that scholarship has not suffered severely by the loss of the books – to judge by the nature of the surviving example, in which the others are mentioned.

This is a Greek work of about 100 A.D., previously ascribed to Plutarch and now conveniently said to be by the pseudo-Plutarch.

It may be called the earliest place-name book to be preserved. It consists of twenty-five short essays, each headed by the name of a river and usually including some discussion of the name of a near-by mountain – along with other *mis*information. For – I am sorry to say – this is not, from our point of view, to be considered a sound scholarly treatise or even a good popularization. If it should be sent to *Names* for a review, I am afraid we should have to deal very severely with it.

Let me give you a sampling ... On the Scamander – which, you remember, is often mentioned in the *Iliad* – part of the entryuns:

> Scamander... was formerly called Xanthos, but changed its name upon this occasion. Scamander, the son of Corybas and Demodice, having beheld the ceremonies while the mysteries of Rhea were being solemnized, immediately ran mad, and being hurried away by his own fury to the River Xanthos, flung himself into the stream, which from thence was called Scamander.

There is no need to illustrate farther, because the entries may be expressed by a formula:

First, a river was formerly called such-and such. There is no example of a river having been nameless.

Second, a certain incident happened, involving a named person. This incident is violent; usually it involves incest (with which the pseudo-Plutarch seems to have been somewhat obsessed), and this incident ends by the named person drowning in the river.

Third, the river is then called by the person's name.

From this description you will agree, I am sure, that this is not a trustworthy work on the origin of place names.

None the less, it offers good examples of certain attitudes toward names that I find characteristic of classical antiquity.

The first of these is the general failure to conceive that a place, such as a river, was ever nameless, and that someone had had to bestow the first name. Since Columbus and the great age of exploration this has been a commonplace of our thought, but it was not so, apparently, for the ancient Greeks. This indicates – as we know from other evidence also – that this people came late into a Mediterranean world that was already civilized, thickly inhabited, and therefore thickly named. The Greek assumption seems to have been that a place always had a name. You learned what the name was, and used it.

This attitude shows even in the founding of new cities, colonies – which, you might think, would be something entirely new and therefore nameable, *ab ovo*. Yet probably a large majority of Greek foundations bore names of the country. In Sicily, for instance, we find Syracusa, Gela, Akragas, Himera, Catane, Leontini, Camarina – all supposed to be non-Greek names, that is, names that were there already.

A nice illustration is from Plato's *Laws*, which treats of the problems of founding a new city. But the naming is not considered a problem. As one of the characters is made to say (Book IV, Cap. 704), the name will be "determined by accident of locality and the original settlement – a river or spring, or some local deity, may give the sanction of a name."

Similar illustrations may be drawn from the *Odyssey*. The much-enduring hero, sometimes not even knowing where he is, comes to many a strange land, but never once does he think he needs to name it. This is in contrast with, for instance, the attitude in the Norse sagas about the discovery of America, in which the first act of the hero in sighting a hitherto unknown land is to give it a name.

Again in Book VI of the *Odyssey* we are told that Nausithous made a foundation: "He laid out the walls of a new city, built houses, erected temples, and allotted the land." Those are considered the essentials. He did not give it name. Instead, he used one that was there already – Scheria.

The ancient Greeks were certainly among the great creative peoples – but, curiously, their creativeness did not extend to naming. Mesopotamia is one of the few important names that is clearly Greek. Many important names such as Asia, Europe, and Egypt were transmitted through the Greeks and have Greek forms, but they are not generally believed to be Greek. Athens, Sparta, Thebes, Parnassus, Olympus, Arcadia – again, few scholars believe that any of these are Greek. The Greeks accepted names rather than gave them.

To find surely Greek place names we are forced to select very small features, particularly islands which were presumably uninhabited at the time when they became known to Greek voyagers. Thus the little islands north of Sicily bore in classical times, and most of them still bear – Greek names. And these are, as it happens, just the simple names that you will find for such features anywhere

– Round Island (which is Stromboli), Pine Island, Heather Island, Twin Island, Bone Island – this last, named from the skeletons of some Carthaginian mercenaries who were marooned there.

Incidentally, this practice of keeping the already-established name furnishes another refutation of the idea that the early Greeks felt themselves a people highly superior to the so-called barbarians. Here we have the contrast with the explorers of the fifteenth and later centuries. A Spaniard certainly felt himself superior even to a civilized Aztec or Inca, chiefly because of his religion. Those others were, literally, going to hell. As non-Christians they had essentially no rights, and so the Spaniard had no qualms about displacing their names, and especially in substituting those of his own religion – such as names of the saints, or Santa Fe, or Trinidad. And the other Europeans did very much the same.

To return to the pseudo-Plutarch (from whom we have wandered considerably) we see that he was thus a good Greek in his assumption that a name might be changed, but not given originally. In spite of bad logic and fixation upon incest, he also illustrates other principles of Greek thought.

Coming into the Mediterranean area, the Greek tribesmen accepted the place names, but these, being in a foreign language, or languages, were unintelligible. At the same time the invaders took over from the local inhabitants a large number of deities and mythological characters, who also bore unintelligible names. Moreover, these invaders – like most primitive peoples – had a rather strong animistic tendency. Possibly as the result of all this the distinction between a personal name and a place name was not, I think – for an early Greek – as clear as it is to us. If there was a river named Alpheus, there would be also a river-god named Alpheus. Which came first? Or did either come first? Were they merely one and the same?

Here we can recall Book XXI of the *Iliad*, in which Achilles fights against the River Xanthos. This is a passage which is not very satisfactory, I think, for most modern readers, because they are puzzled as to whether the opponent is the god or merely the flooding stream. To a Greek it probably raised no problem, because the name was for both.

To be sure, *xanthos* is a good descriptive term for a stream; it could mean Yellow River. But again this might not have suggested

to the Greek that the stream was named from the color of the water. He would have been just as likely to think that the god was so named because he had blond hair.

Related to what seems to be a partial failure to distinguish personal names from place names is another overwhelming tendency of the pseudo-Plutarch to derive the one from the other. The place – be it river or mountain – is there. But behind it, somewhere, is the person, and the person is conceived as coming first. Must we assume that the Greeks, more than other peoples, were interested in people and in personality?

You wonder, naturally, whether this argument has to be based entirely upon one obscure and even worthless late writer. No, it need not be. We might cite Diodorus Siculus, the elder Pliny, Strabo, and even others.

Strabo, for instance, usually an adequate and hard-headed geographer, writes (Lib., 14, I, 15) of the island Samos: "it was called Parthenia, then Anthemus, then Melamphyllus, and then Samos, whether after some native hero or after someone who colonized it." Here we notice, again, the assumptions that there was always an earlier name and that all the names for the island were originally those of people.

(And this, I may say, is of particular interest since in earlier books Strabo twice mentions that *samos* means a high place in some early language. Apparently in the later book he was using another source. In any case, it seemed reasonable to him that Samos should be a personal name.)

Quite similar passages may be quoted from the elder Pliny, whom we may consider a Roman under strong Greek influence. As an example, he gives as one possibility (Lib., VI, 28) of why the Red Sea should be so named by the assumption of a King Erythras, i. e., King Red, though that is scarcely a region where one would expect to find a red-head.

This system for the explanation of place names, we may say, makes little of phonetics, less of geography, and almost nothing of history.

We can thus be justified in a generalization that the method of the pseudo-Plutarch represents the characteristic Greek approach to place names – that is, to assume that a place had, in some way, always had a name, that it had borne two or more names, and that

these names were from persons, and most frequently from an incident involving those persons.

As one note of protest, however, we may cite Herodotus (Book IV) on certain names. He seems really to be somewhat annoyed at the general idea – lacking, he thinks, good evidence – that Libya, Asia, and Europe (his three continents) bear names of people, and particularly that these should be names of women. He sums up – and you may notice an almost petulant note – "As for Europe ... nobody knows where it got its name, unless we say from Europa the Tyrian woman – before that having been nameless, like the rest. This, however, is unlikely; for Europa was from Asia and never visited what is now called Europe, but only voyaged from Phoenicia to Crete and from Crete to Lycia. But that is quite enough on this matter – and in any case I shall continue to use the names which custom has made familiar."

As a cautious scholar, however, I wish – as a final note to this discussion of the Greeks – to sound a warning. Granted that nearly all these derivations are fanciful and nearly all these persons fictitiously attached to a fictitious incident, we do not need to go the whole way, as does Miss Jane Harrison in her *Themis* (p. 267): "An 'eponymous' hero never 'gives' his name, he always receives it." Since in historical times nothing is commoner than for a place to be named from a person, why should it not have been so also in pre-historical times? I even think that a certain amount of evidence can be educed that Europa was an actual princess of Tyre and that her name may be involved with that of the continent.

A question naturally to be raised is whether the principles here suggested as being Greek may not indeed be universal principles, applicable to all peoples. I have already, indeed – to some extent – demonstrated the contrary by citing the practise of various explorers. For further demonstration, I turn to that people who have so often been put forward in contrast to the Greeks, viz., the Hebrews.

Scattered through the Penteteuch and the Historical Books are about forty explanations of place names – a sufficient number to allow us to make some deductions.

We should, however, first note that the situation of the Hebrews, historically, was much like that of the Greeks. They were wild tribesmen who had conquered a civilized and thickly named country,

amalagamated with the inhabitants, and accepted the place names. A large number of the names, thus, were unintelligible, e. g., Jerusalem, itself. But, in spite of similar conditions, the Hebrews thought about names very differently from the way the Greeks did.

A an example, in *Exodus*, 15, we find the name Marah for a spring or waterhole in the desert. This is so commonplace a descriptive, when translated, that it is practically a generic – meaning, merely, "bitter" or "salt." But – and here is one of the few details in which the two peoples agree – tne Hebrew commentator ignores the descriptive quality. Instead, he says that Marah, though indeed it *was* salt, was so *called* because of a particular incident: "And when they [the children of Israel in the wilderness] came to Marah, they could not drink of the waters of Marah, for they were bitter: therefore, the name of it was called Marah."

It is easy to see what the pseudo-Plutarch or some other Greek would have made of it. He would – to make it short – have had a character named Marah who drowned there.

Moreover, in general, the Hebrew thought thus. In *Genesis*, 26, we have no fewer than four names explained, all from incidents. These may be, for all I know, the real origins, or the may be later rationalizations. From our present point of view this makes no difference, since in either case we see the same type of thinking involved.

Of these four names the most interesting, as well as the best known, is Beersheba. *Beer* means "spring," or "waterhole," and the commentator accepts this generic. *Sheba* could mean "seven," and might be taken in this sense to give a name of the common type Seven Wells. But the commentator prefers to take it in the meaning of "oath," and to tell of an incident in the life of the patriarch Isaac, involving an oath. Again, note the explanation by means of an incident, so that we have The Well of the Oath.

Also lacking from Hebrew commentaries in the suggestion that there was always a name. Most of the stories seem to assume that the described naming was the original and only one. Stories of places bearing first one name and then another are few, and are so circumstantial that they are probably historical, e. g., that Dan was first called Laish, and that Bethel was first called Luz. Entirely lacking are the long lists of successive names for the same place.

In one circumstance, however, a change of name seems to have been conventional, that is, that when a man captured a city, it would take his name. We see this custom, apparently, in *Numbers*, 32:

> And Jair... went and took the small towns thereof [i.e., of Gilead], and called them Havothjair [i.e., the villages of Jair].
>
> And Nobah went and took Kenath, ... and called it Nobah, after his own name.

This explains why Jerusalem was sometimes known as the City of David, after he had captured it. On the custom we are lucky enough to have direct evidence in *II Samuel*, 12. When Joab – that ever-loyal royalist – is successfully besieging Rabbah, he sends word to King David to come: "lest I take the city, and it be called by my name."

The difference between Hebrew and Greek necessarily is displayed in the kind of names selected for treatment. The Greek could treat any name, intelligible or not. For instance, he could merely have said that there was a king named Jerusalem, and have gone on from there. But the Hebrew had to have a name that made sense in his own language – either genuinely or by folk-etymology. This might even lead him into a kind of playing with words, or punning – which is quite uncharacteristic of Greek name-lore.

A good case of this occurs in *Genesis*, 19, when Lot pleads with the Lord to spare one city from the disaster of Sodom and Gomorrah – "Is it not a little one?" The commentator adds, "Therefore the name of the city was called Zoar." Now, Zoar means "little," and that may have been the historical reason for the city's being so named, just as we have the English name Littleton. But again, in the anecdote, we note the overwhelming love of the Hebrews for incident – in this case, even for the verbalism of a play on words.

On the whole, however, few of the Hebrew explanations are as far-fetched as this, and they are for this reason better stories than the Greek ones, I think, both from the literary and from the onomastic point of view. The pseudo-Plutarch leaves me cold, but many of the Hebrew stories stir my imagination, and I have the feeling that at least they *might* be true.

Take Allonbachuth, as explained in *Genesis*, 35. It means literally "Oak-tree of weeping," and so might really preserve the memory of some misfortune. The explanation runs: "But Deborah

Rebekah's nurse died, and she was buried beneath Beth-el under an oak: and the name of it was called the Oak of Weeping". It was *not* called Deborah's Oak, and so we note again what we might call the flight from personality. We have also the tying-up of the tale to the patriarchal cycle, with resulting credibility and even possibility of truth – all the more so, perhaps, since this is (and I think this very curious) – this is the only place in the Bible where Rebekah's nurse is mentioned at all.

Finally, I might say that among the Biblical stories one or two have every appearance of being really historical, and these too are of interest as showing attitudes. Such a one is that of Shomeron, the important city we know by the Latinized form as Samaria. The passage in *I Kings*, 16, 24, runs: "he [King Omri] bought the hill Shemeron from Shemer, and called the name of the city which he built after the name of Shemer, owner of the hill." Here at last we have a resemblance to the Greek practice in that the king did not call the city after himself, but kept the already-existing local name. The same holds true even when we realize that the Hebrew radical sh-m-r means "watch," and that the owner Shemer may possibly have been invented for a hill which really took its name because it was a lookout.

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What I have here been attempting to set forth is obviously the Hebrew and Greek imagination with respect to names rather than their actual practice at naming. Yet we who study names should never forget that we are dealing with a highly imaginative process. And even this sketchy presentation should serve to show how different two contemporary and not very far-removed peoples can be in their attitudes – the Greek explaining names as commemorations of persons; the Hebrew, in terms of incidents.

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