

Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

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What's in a Name?

In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah came Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon unto Jerusalem, and besieged it. And the Lord gave Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand, with part of the vessels of the house of God: which he carried into the land of Shinar to the house of his god; and he brought the vessels into the treasure house of his god. And the king spake unto Ashpenaz the master of his eunuchs, that he should bring certain of the children of Israel, and of the king's seed, and of the princes; Children in whom was no blemish, but well favoured, and skilful in all wisdom, and cunning in knowledge, and understanding science, and such as had ability in them to stand in the king's palace, and whom they might teach the learning and the tongue of the Chaldeans. And the king appointed them a daily provision of the king's meat, and of the wine which he drank: so nourishing them three years, that at the end thereof they might stand before the king. Now among these were of the children of Judah, Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah: Unto whom the prince of the eunuchs gave names: for he gave unto Daniel the name of Belteshazzar; and to Hananiah, of Shadrach; and to Mishael, of Meshach; and to Azariah, of Abednego. (Daniel 1:1-7)

Before investigating the royal Babylonian experiment, we need to examine names. We live with an occasional sense that Bible names have more significance than our typical twenty first century Western attitude toward names. Routinely even conscientious Bible students will correctly refer to Daniel, his Jewish name, not to Belteshazzar, the name the Babylonians gave him. However, we almost never hear Daniel's three friends identified by their Jewish names. For most of us they are always "Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego." What is the point? Why treat Daniel differently from his three associates? Is there a difference? Does it matter which name we use? I suggest that there is a world of difference between these names. First, let's examine the basic definition of both the four Jewish names and their Babylonian given-names.

Jewish Names

1. Daniel. "God is my judge," or "My God is Judge."
2. Hananiah. "God has favored," or "Jehovah has shown grace."
3. Mishael. "Who is what God is?"
4. Azariah. "Jehovah has helped."

Babylonian Names

1. Belteshazzar (Daniel). "Bel will protect." Bel was one of many Babylonian gods.
2. Shadrach (Hananiah). "Inspired of Aku," another Babylonian god.
3. Meshach (Mishael). "Belonging to Aku."

4. Abednego (Azariah). "Servant of Nego," yet another Babylonian god.

How could we miss the significance? Every time these young men mentioned their Jewish names, they were reminded of their God and of His faithfulness and grace. In stark contrast every time they mentioned their Babylonian names, they were reminded of one of Babylon's gods.

In many ways a name becomes a person's identity. How did these three faithful young men want to be known? Did they want to retain their faith in their God, despite their present captivity, or did they want to "Go with the flow" and "fit in" with their Babylonian captors? They were in a position to "rub shoulders" with Babylon's best. They could go with the program outlined by the king and almost certainly make a name for themselves in Babylon, but of what value to them was a Babylonian name? Is that what they wanted?

You ask, "What is the relevance of these old and strange sounding names? No one today would consider naming a child one of these names." Ah, relevance; few things could be more timely and relevant in our day than this lesson. A young believer graduates from college and starts to work in his/her first career position. On Friday after work one of the more popular and influential leaders in the company approaches you, "Some of us are going out for drinks. Would you like to join us?" Even if this young believer doesn't care for alcohol, the tug of fitting into the popular crowd becomes incredibly strong. Even if a new spouse is waiting at home, the allure of making points with these people is far more intoxicating than the beverages that will be served that night. What is

your chosen identity? How do you want to be known in your workplace?

Many years ago I made a major career change. The owner of the new business showed me great favor and made a significant investment in my new career path, so I “owed him.” Periodically he would approach me to join him and a few friends for a few days at a beach resort in Mexico. They did some deep sea fishing, something I would no doubt have enjoyed, but I overheard enough talk about their trips to know that they did many other things that I had no business or reason to do. At first I tried to evade the invitation by asking when the trip was planned and always offering the excuse that I had already made plans that I couldn’t reasonably change. With each invitation the pressure from the business’s owner mounted. He really wanted me to join him on one of these trips. Finally I decided that he needed to understand my “name,” my chosen identity. One day he approached me in the hallway of the office with a rather insistent invitation to join him and his friends on their next trip to the Mexican resort. Without hesitation I responded, “When I go on vacations, I always take my wife with me.” He reeled back, almost visibly showing the shock of my response. He never again asked me to join him and his friends on one of those trips. I finally made it clear to him that my “name,” my chosen identity as a believer did not provide for the kind of “entertainment” that he enjoyed on these trips. He continued to respect me and to support me in my business. In fact I stayed in this position for over eighteen years. I could have easily compromised my “name,” but, whether it mattered to him or not, it did matter to me. I fully realized over the years in this position that the Lord providentially intervened many times to enable me to adjust my schedule and emphasize my ministry with more ease than in any position I’d ever held. Interestingly, despite not going with my boss’s social agenda, I also made more money for myself and for him than most of his other staff. I gravely doubt that such blessings would have followed, had I chosen to claim that new “name” that he offered to me—that he at first insisted that I take.

These young men were captives in a strange and hostile land. They faced grave choices in this new world. Would they trust their God, or would they trust Babylon’s king? By appearances Babylon’s king, armies, and Babylon’s gods had prevailed over their God, so why should they continue holding to their faith in such a hostile world? The answer was simple. They may not at this moment have fully understood the reasons for their captivity, but they knew that their God was the only true God, and they had no intention of walking away from Him, regardless of the

consequences. Perhaps they understood that Judah’s sinful rebellion from their God was responsible for their captivity. Perhaps they didn’t. They did know that their God was their only hope, even in this strange and hostile world.

Now among these were of the children of Judah, Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah.... Daniel and his three friends were not the only Jews in this royal Babylonian experiment. Don’t overlook the simple revelation, “...**among these** were....” Who were the other Jews who chose to go along with the king’s experiment? What are their names? Sometimes the Bible is as revealing by what it does not say as by what it does say. There is a pattern throughout the first book of the Bible, Genesis. As Moses writes the history of the various families, he will trace their family tree sometimes for several generations. However, when the latest generation of that family turns away from God, Moses will document the sin and stop his documentation of their offspring. When a people turn from God, they lose their identity with Him, and they lose their special blessing from Him. The other Jews who willingly joined the royal experiment and followed the Babylonian program, including embracing their new Babylonian names, aren’t worth a drop of inspired ink in the writings of Daniel!

There can be little doubt that the intent of the king in giving these men Babylonian names was to reshape their religion and their personal identity. Slowly mold them into converted Babylonians. Educate them in Babylon’s culture and religion. Daily remind them that Babylon’s armies and gods sacked and ruined their native land. Immerse them in Babylon’s ways one small step at a time. Had these young men embraced this subtle change, they too would remain outside our knowledge, appearing in a nondescript “...among them were....”

Sinful culture is insidious. It attempts to work slowly and subtly, always working to remain “below the radar” of a godly conscience. Think about prime time television twenty years ago. Think about its images today. Have they changed? When did they change? You likely can’t identify a single date or event, but if you consciously compare its content today with twenty years ago, you realize that a tremendous, and morally decadent trend has altered the content of what we see on the screen. Someone is trying to get you to adopt a new name, a foreign name that separates you from your faith and from your God. Will you and I go silently into the oblivion of the faithless, or will we choose, even in the face of hostile pressures, to retain our spiritual identity and heritage? Future generations will never know we existed, or they will bless us for remaining faithful to our God. Which course do we choose?

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Worship service each Sunday 10:30 A. M.
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