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ENGL 115

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Presentation Outline

1. **Thesis**
	1. **The act of naming, especially in terms of the lineage of Abraham, serves to mark transition and prophecy; furthermore it is used to transcend science, social class and human expectation.**
2. **Evidence**
	1. **When God renames people in the Bible, his transition for or rebirth of them can exceed what is thought to be humanly possible. This new naming marks not only change but a miracle, a divine intervention of human science.**
		1. Passage
			1. “No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the ancestor of nations. I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you” (Gen. 17.5-6).
			2. “As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. I will bless her, and moreover I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall give rise to nations” (Gen 17.15-16).
			3. “Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed, and said to himself, “Can a child be born to aman who is a hundred years old? Can Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?” (Gen 17.17)
		2. Explanation
			1. Sarai and Abram, as they were once known, are very advanced in age and likely believe that they are at the end of their lives, and know that physically it isn’t possible for people to still be “fruitful” in such old age. By changing their names, God is marking that he is also changing their futures, as well as transcending the laws of science in order to make his will a reality. The extra syllable “ha” in “Abraham” comes from the Hebrew word *hamon*, meaning “multitude,” because God is going to “make nations of” him. Similarly, God changes Sarai’s name to Sarah, blessing her as well with the ability to “give rise to nations.”
			2. Abraham and Sarah both initially fail to believe in God’s blessing. As evidenced by the humans’ disbelief, even in Biblical times when people are said to have lived hundreds of years, it is still impossible for people in their nineties to create and bear a child. In fact, it’s so unbelievable to Sarah and Abraham that Abraham “fell on his face and laughed” at the idea, as did Sarah in Gen. 18.12. God’s power in the Hebrew Bible transcends human ideas of what is and isn’t possible, even in terms of *God has changed their names to mark a transition as well as a miracle.*
	2. **God also names people in order to use those people as markers or signs for other people, as he did in the case of Isaac.**
		1. Passage
			1. “Your wife Sarah shall bear you a son, and you shall name him Isaac” (Gen.17.19).
			2. “The Lord said to Abraham, “Why did Sarah laugh, and say, “Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old? Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?” (Gen. 18.13-14)
			3. “Now Sarah said, God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me. And she said, “Who would ever have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age” (Gen 21.6-7).
		2. Explanation
			1. Here, it is clear that Sarah does indeed have doubt about whether the Lord can or will do what he promises. She is fearful of the Lord regardless, denying to him that she ever doubted him. He follows through with his word, much to her joy and surprise. Now elderly, Sarah is finally able to bear Abraham’s son. She calls him “Isaac,” meaning “laughter,” as God commands her to do. This serves as a permanent reminder that the pair were wrong to laugh in the face of God, and of the joy to be found in the grace of God. It’s a testament to Sarah and Abraham’s faith, especially as it is restored with their new names. God chose Isaac’s name knowing that Abraham and Sarah and many other people would doubt him. *He uses Isaac’s name as a reminder* that despite human doubt, nothing is “too wonderful for the Lord.”
	3. **Lastly, the act of naming is not limited only to God. In fact, Hagar, a lowly slave, performs an act of power in giving God himself the name El-Roi.**
		1. Passage
			1. “So she named the Lord who spoke to her, “You are El-Roi;” for she said, “Have I really seen God and remained alive after seeing him?” (Gen. 16.13)
		2. Explanation
			1. Even a person of as low social status as Hagar is capable of naming God. In the book of Genesis, Hagar is the only person to give God a name: El-Roi, which translates to “God of Seeing,” or “One Who Sees.” It’s notable that he receives it from Hagar, an Egyptian slave belonging to the blessed, fruitful, exalted pair of Sarah and Abraham. Naming can cross social lines, not only from low-ranking humans to high-ranking humans, but also from low-status people to God himself. Hagar names God for seeing her, and, in turn, she sees him (though not physically). God does not speak to everyone in the Bible, yet for some reason he chooses to speak to Hagar. The area where this happens becomes known as Beer-lahai-roi, and again names come into play because this place is named after the divine event of a mere slave naming God. For any human to “see” God in that way, and to take it a step further and actually *give God a new name*, is unprecedented. In some ways it could even place Hagar close to God as equal in some way. *Naming can transcend ideas of class and power, and even serve to redistribute power.*
3. **Explain how the evidence and/or your review of the text expanded or clarified your understanding of the text**
	1. In reviewing the text I was able to recontextualize some of God’s behavior towards the people, especially in instances where he seemed angry or indignant, as in the case of Abraham and Sarah laughing at him and doubting his power. Initially I viewed this as something that would have angered God, but in my rereading I realized that in naming their son “laughter,” God is just showing them that his power and will are to be laughed at in joy, not disbelief. Additionally, I was able to see more clearly how it is not always clear who God favors and how, or why, as in the case of Hagar. God’s relationship with humans is very complex.
4. **Conclusion**
	1. In the Bible, naming serves several different purposes. The first and most obvious is to mark a transition. However, the transitions God gives people in the Hebrew Bible aren’t ordinary transitions. They’re blessings or curses or covenants that transcend human science and custom. Furthermore names can be used as messages or warnings. Lastly, naming isn’t constricted only to God. Even a lowly slave can give a name to God, meaning that names can transgress social status as well. Naming is an important Biblical tool used largely as a form of challenge against customs, beliefs or ideas.
5. **Reference**
	1. The New Oxford Annotated Bible, Fourth Edition. Michael D. Coogan. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.