

Barack, Thy Name is Biblical

By David E. Scheim

Vilifying Barack Obama's name has become a favorite blood sport in the 2008 presidential campaign. Recent examples range from repeated mentions of "B. Hussein Obama" by conservative pundit Ann Coulter to four allusions to Obama's "Muslim sounding middle name" by Republican strategist Cheri Jacobus on MSNBC in defense of similar language. *Time* Correspondent Mark Halperin predicts that the McCain campaign will likely continue to "emphasize Barack Hussein Obama's unusual name," despite McCain's repudiation of this tactic. Obama himself warns supporters that his "funny" name will be targeted.

The lineage of Obama's name, however, extending back to a revered biblical namesake, befits his status as a Christian of rich ancestral influences. Obama's first name, Barack, means "blessed" in the African languages of Luo and Swahili, both spoken widely in his deceased father's birthplace of Kenya. The African "Barack" and its Arabic root, "baracka," are both cousins of the Hebrew word "baruch," which has the same meaning. On the campaign trail, Obama notes: "Barack, interestingly enough, means the same as 'baruch'; it means one who is blessed."

Famous historical figures with that name are philosopher Baruch Spinoza, philanthropist Bernard Baruch and even the current Pope, Benedict XVI—"Benedict" is the Latinized form of Baruch. Despite their similar sounds, Barack has a different linguistic root than Barak, the last name of former Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak, which means "lightning" in Hebrew.

Obama's middle name, Hussein, derives from the Arabic word Hassan, which means something inherently good. Some linguists believe that the Irish name Ó hOsáin or Hassan is derived from the same word. Historical figures with names deriving from that root include Prince Hassan and the late King Hussein of Jordan and King Hassan II of Morocco. The name of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, an ally of both the United States and of Israel, has precisely the same roots, in reverse, as Barack Hussein.

Barack Obama shares with past American presidents, including Abraham Lincoln, Zachary Taylor, and Benjamin Harrison, the distinction of a notable biblical namesake. Baruch Ben Neriah was a scribe and friend of the prophet Jeremiah and also the reputed author of the apocryphal Book of Baruch, a canonical biblical book for Roman Catholics. He is the subject of Jewish and Christian religious lore from the Talmud to the writings of fourth-century church father Jerome and is portrayed as a righteous sage granted a tour of heaven itself.

Baruch Ben Neriah makes a fascinating appearance in recent archeological finds, as detailed by J. Edward Wright in his book, *Baruch Ben Neriah: From Biblical Scribe to Apocalyptic Seer*. Showing up also, indirectly, in these finds is Ebed-Melech, a black Ethiopian who is identified with Baruch Ben Neriah in some ancient rabbinic commentaries and who rescued Jeremiah after the prophet was imprisoned by three ministers of King Zedekiah (Jeremiah 38:1-13). The names of Baruch Ben Neriah, "the scribe," and of two of these royal ministers all appear in ancient Hebrew inscriptions on clay seals, the first on display at the Israel Museum in Jerusalem and the others unearthed in dramatic recent finds by archeologist Eilat Mazar in Jerusalem just this July and in August 2005.

I asked Dr. Wright, who is director of Judaic studies at the University of Arizona and president of the J.F. Albright Institute of Archeological Research, about these developments concerning Obama's name. He replied, "The way some pundits are using name associations is beyond simply naive; it is truly shameful. As names, both Barack and Hussein have noble pedigrees, and this fact should be used to promote understanding and not to provoke political or religious enmity."

It remains to be seen how the strange versus "blessed" interplay behind Obama's name will resonate with bible-centered voters, who Obama has been vigorously courting, as well as with other Americans. As Obama name attacks try to raise the specter of Saddam "Hussein," how will the late, bedraggled dictator fare in the linguistic lineage mix against Pope Benedict, dignitaries and Obama's venerated biblical namesake, Baruch ben Neriah? Will voters be influenced more by fear of differences or by appreciation of America's diverse religious and cultural tapestry and the prophetic strands within?

If the latter influences prevail, and if Obama's linguistic lineage continues to feed his charismatic appeal, his detractors may find themselves wishing they could just call him Barry.

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