

The name *Johanna*: some historical, etymological, and cultural notes

Etymology: Though the name *Johanna* might appear to be the feminine form of the name *Johannes*, these two names were originally distinct. *Joannes* is the Hellenized version of the name *Yōḥānān*, as can be ascertained from the typical Greek ending *-s*.¹ *Ioānna*, on the other hand, almost certainly goes back to an already feminine form of the same name, i.e., *Yōḥānā*. Both of these names have a further antecedent, namely the compound name *Yəḥōḥānān*, “Yahweh is gracious” (Rogers 2009: 4209–4211). As the phonological system of Greek does not generally represent the Hebrew’s guttural consonants (i.e., /ʔ/, /h/, /ḥ/, and /ʕ/), the relevant consonant was elided, leading to Greek *Ioānna* (Wolters 2008: 398). The /h/ was re-inserted in the Latinized *Johanna* in analogy with *Johannes*.

The Hebrew Bible mentions eight persons that bear the name *Yəḥōḥānān*: these included several high priests as well as members of the Hasmonean dynasty, which came to rule Judea following the Maccabean Revolt up to the Roman period (140–37 BCE). It is likely due to its popularity amongst the Jewish elite that we find the name in the New Testament, specifically in the Gospel of Luke (8:3). This passage refers to a Joanna, wife of Chuza, one of the stewards of King Herod.² The Gospel of Luke refers to her again (24:10) as one of the women who were present when the tomb of Jesus was found empty (Khoury 2008: 480).

Although little is known about Chuza, King Herod’s steward, it is clear that the Jo[h]anna mentioned here was an early follower of Christ amongst Judea’s upper class. The fact that the Gospel of Luke mentions that Joanna, along with several other women, travelled with Jesus Christ is significant. The notion of a woman abandoning her family to travel with and serve a rabbi would have been unacceptable in traditional Jewish circles (Witherington 1998: 117).

¹ This is also how we know that *Yūnus*, the Arabic form of the name *Jonah* (He. *Yonā*), was derived from the Greek *Jonas* rather than directly from Hebrew.

² *Ioānna gynē ’Erōdou epitropou Xouza*.

On account of Joanna's devotion to Christ, she came to be revered in both the Catholic and Orthodox Churches, where she is known as Saint Joanna the Myrrhbearer. In Europe, given name Johanna only gained popularity in Europe from the 12th century onwards, starting in the southwest of France and spreading from there across the continent (Yonge 1863: 112). At this point, the name was phonologically adapted to Europe's different languages, such as Jeanne (French), Joan (English), Sinéad (Irish), and Jaana (Finnish).

Parallels in Semitic: The root *ḥ-n-n* is in fact preserved in many Semitic languages, ranging from Akkadian *'ennum*, "kindness" to Arabic *ḥanān* (also a popular personal name), "sympathy" (Olmo Lete et al. 2004: 360–361; Wehr & Cowan 1994: 244–245). The root's original meaning appears to be "to be kind; to be benevolent, graceful".³ Consequently, the root occurs in many theophoric names. Possibly the oldest occurrence of such a name is found in Ugaritic, in use between the 14th and 12th century BCE. Here we find the name *ḥn'il*, "May El be graceful". This name is in fact semantically identical to the Hebrew *yāhōḥānān*.

On the other side of the Mediterranean, names with this root were also in use. Undoubtedly the most famous example of this comes to us again through Latin: Hannibal. This name, taken from Punic, a form of Phoenician that was in use in North Africa, consists of the elements *ḥanni* and *ba'l*, "lord", and is recorded in the unvocalized Punic inscriptions as *ḥnb'l*. It is a historical irony that this name, which we can translate as "May Ba'al be graceful" is now associated either with Rome's greatest enemy or with the cannibal antagonist of Thomas Harris' 1981 novels *Red Dragon* and (more prominently) *The Silence of the Lambs* (Harris 1988: 2).

³ It is from the same root that we get the names Hanna and Anna.

References

- Harris, Thomas. 1988. *The Silence of the Lambs*. 1st ed. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Khoury, Demetri Matta. 2008. *A Cloud of Witnesses: Saints and Martyrs from the Holy Land*. Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse.
- Olmo Lete, Gregorio del, Joaquín Sanmartín, Hartwig Altenmüller, Bertold Spuler & Gregorio del Olmo Lete. 2004. Handbook of Oriental Studies = Handbuch Der Orientalistik. Sect. 1 Vol. 67 Pt. 2: The Near and Middle East / Ed. by H. Altenmüller ... *A Dictionary of the Ugaritic Language in the Alphabetic Tradition* / by Gregorio Del Olmo Lete and Joaquín Sanmartín I – z. Vol. 67. 2. rev. ed. Leiden: Brill.
- Rogers, J. S. 2009. *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary*. 3: H-J. Edited by D. N. Freedman. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Wehr, Hans & J. M. Cowan. 1994. *A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic: Arabic – English*. 4. ed., considerably enl. and amended by the author. edited by J. Milton Cowan. Ithaca, NY: Spoken Language Services.
- Witherington, Ben. 1998. *Women in the Ministry of Jesus: A Study of Jesus' Attitudes to Women and Their Roles as Reflected in His Earthly Life*. Reprinted. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press.
- Wolters, Al. 2008. IOYNIAN (Romans 16:7) and the Hebrew Name 'Yēhunnī. *Journal of Biblical Literature* 127 (2). 397–408. doi.org/10.2307/25610127.
- Yonge, Charlotte Mary. 1863. *History of Christian Names*. I–II. London: Barker, Son and Bourn, West Strand.