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Why “Jesus”?

According to Matthew’s Gospel, the name is the mission.

BY DONALD E. BURKE

In William Shakespeare’s play, *Romeo and Juliet*, Juliet poses the question, “What’s in a name?” and goes on to assert, “That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet.” In saying this, Juliet dismisses the importance of a name. The man she loves could be known by any name and she would still love him. A name does not make the person.

I understand Juliet’s point, but would suggest that names do in fact carry more weight than this. They can be more than labels that may be interchanged at will. That is true certainly for biblical names. Often they communicate the character and mission of the person named.

For example, the name of the prophet

Elijah means “the Lord is my God.” Given Elijah’s uncompromising message that Israel must choose loyalty to the Lord over the worship of other gods, the prophet’s name reflects his character and vocation (see 1 Kings 17-2 Kings 2).

Or consider the name of Daniel who served in the court of the Babylonian conqueror of Judah. In the face of efforts to extinguish the Jewishness of Daniel and his compatriots, and his subjection to a series of trials, the meaning of Daniel’s name—“God is my judge”—expresses his confidence in the judgment of God over that of the Babylonian king. Walking the tightrope between service to his Babylonian overlord and devotion to God, Daniel’s life embodied the

meaning of his name, recognizing only God’s ultimate governance.

It should come as no surprise, then, that when we turn to the story of the birth of Jesus in Matthew, the names given to the infant carry significance and are not simple labels applied to the holy child. Matthew identifies a series of names given to him: son of David (see Matthew 1:1), son of Abraham (see Matthew 1:1) and Immanuel (see Matthew 1:23). Each one adds depth to Matthew’s understanding of the mission and identity of the child. But the name that stands above all the others is the one given to the child by Joseph, following the instructions of the angel: Jesus (see Matthew 1:21).

More Than a Label

The Greek name “Jesus” is a translation of the Hebrew name “Joshua” which means “the Lord saves.” At the time of Jesus’ birth, Joshua was a popular name among Jews. It recalled the successor to Moses, Joshua the son of Nun, who led the Israelites into the Promised Land. According to Matthew, naming the child Jesus conveys the mission that God gives to him: “He will save his people from their sins” (Matthew 1:21). Thus, the name given to Jesus is more than a label that could have been replaced by any other name. This name is pregnant with significance.

clothes I shall *be saved*” (author’s translation). While many English translations speak of the woman being “made well,” the Greek verb means “to be saved.” In his response to the woman, Jesus says, “Take heart, woman; your faith *has saved you*” (author’s translation). The story concludes with the statement that instantly the woman *was saved*. For Matthew, this is not simply a story about a random healing; Matthew’s choice of language makes it clear that the healing of the woman was an act of salvation brought about by Jesus.

Later still, in another scene on the water, Jesus invites Peter to join him in

This is confirmed later at the Last Supper when Jesus broke the bread and shared the cup of wine with his disciples saying, “Drink from it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many *for the forgiveness of sins*” (Matthew 26:27-28; emphasis added). This is the language of sacrifice in which the breaking of the body of Jesus and the shedding of his blood is understood as a sacrificial act to secure forgiveness for sins. Jesus’ disciples and Matthew’s readers would have recognized this language immediately as drawing upon the Old Testament’s provisions for the forgiveness of sins through the

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Introduced at the beginning of Matthew, the full meaning of Jesus’ name unfolds only as the story progresses and as the saving activity of Jesus takes shape. Reading Matthew carefully fleshes out the meaning of the name of Jesus. For example, Matthew 8 tells the story of when Jesus and his disciples get into a boat and set sail. Though a storm overtakes them and threatens to sink the boat, Jesus is sound asleep. The disciples, however, are gripped with fear and cry out to Jesus, “Lord, *save us!* We are perishing!” (Matthew 8:25 *NRSV*; emphasis added). Jesus then stills the stormy wind. In this scene, the plea of the disciples has a very specific meaning: save us from our immediate physical peril. But we have to read this story in light of the name given to Jesus in Matthew 1:21 and acknowledge that “salvation” comes in many ways and diverse circumstances.

“Save Me!”

Sometimes the connections between the name of Jesus and his mission are hidden in English translations. For example, in Matthew 9 Jesus encounters a woman who had been afflicted for 12 years (see Matthew 9:20-22). The woman surreptitiously touches Jesus’ clothing, having come to believe “If I simply touch his

walking on the water. Initially successful, Peter suddenly begins to sink and cries out, “Lord, *save me!*” (Matthew 14:30; emphasis added). Of course, Jesus does, and the episode concludes with Peter’s exclamation, “Truly you are the Son of God” (Matthew 14:33).

A Ransom for Many

These three episodes display the breadth of Matthew’s vision of the salvation that Jesus brings. Yet in the naming of Jesus, the angel provides a very specific interpretation of Jesus’ name: “He will save his people from their sins.” This clearly is fundamental to the mission of Jesus.

For Matthew, Jesus’ mission is to give his life as a ransom for many (see Matthew 20:28). The image of a ransom being paid builds upon the practice of debt-slavery in which a person who could not pay a debt could be forced into slavery. This bondage often was irreversible since the enslaved individual had little prospect of repaying the debt. But if someone, usually a relative, offered to pay the debt, then the freedom of the slave could be secured. This is the mission of Jesus described in Matthew 20:28: to give his life as a ransom to pay the debt owed by many. To ransom us from the power of sin and the guilt of our sins. Our freedom is at stake!

sacrificial system. In the life of the church, this language was repeated whenever the sacrifice of Jesus was remembered (see, for example, 1 Corinthians 11:23-26).

By linking the mission of Jesus with his name at the very beginning of his Gospel, Matthew foreshadows how the story of Jesus will unfold. He anticipates the mission of Jesus that will be expressed using several different images. But most important of all, Matthew introduces a sacrificial image in which the very name of Jesus articulates his mission to “save his people from their sins.” He points us, in the first chapter of his story of Jesus, toward the final chapters in which he recounts the sacrificial death of Jesus as a ransom for many.

According to Matthew, the mission of Jesus was not primarily political, military, social or economic. It has implications for each of these spheres. But fundamentally, the coming of Jesus was to save his people from their sins. When we pronounce the name of Jesus—“the Lord saves”—we are reminded of this mission. It is embedded in the Nativity of our Saviour and the giving of his sacred name. ☪

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