

Three Modes of Human Contact with Reality: “Feeling” (“Ham”), “Perceiving” (“Japheth”), “Naming” (“Shem”) (Gen. 9:18)

Noah’s three sons all had names originating in Hebrew-language verbs.

What is the biblical message?

The Bible states this in no ambiguous terms: After the Great Deluge, the origin of all humanity were Noah’s three sons – Shem, Ham and Japheth (Genesis 9:18).

Examining the Hebrew-language roots of all three names, a bizarre unexpected phenomenon pops up. This has major implications to understanding the biblical message emanating from the names:

All names relate to biblical Hebrew verbs, indicative of three alternative options for humans to relate to reality:

(1) “Ham”: *Ham* in Hebrew simply means hot. For example, one of the Hebrew names for Sun is Hamah (an alternative in modern Hebrew is Shemesh). Hot obviously describes a **feeling** (there is no natural physical property relating to hot; there is only temperature);

(2) “Japheth”: In biblical Hebrew *Yefet*. This name derives from the Hebrew-language *Yofi* (beauty), which gives rise to various words like *Yaffae* (beautiful), *Yippui* (beautification) and else. *Yefet* is obviously a description of our relation to **perceived** reality (there is no natural physics’ property named beauty; there is only related scientifically-defined term, denoted symmetry; the latter is occasionally linked to our perceived beauty in nature);

(3) “Shem”: In biblical Hebrew Name. The latter adds a new dimension to human experience of reality. We no longer remain passive (feeling, perceiving). Delivering names, we attach meanings to that of reality which we feel and perceive.

Human experience of reality has progressed throughout human history from feeling, to perceiving to naming. Each bore particular fruits that, taken together, constitute the history of humankind on Planet Earth.

Let us elaborate on each of those “fruits” individually, as we progress from feeling, to perceiving, to delivering names.

(1) *Ham*

Relating to reality via feelings necessarily lead to reactions (related to these feeling). Major “fruits” of such reactions are wars, massacres, atrocities, adulteries, stealing, extortion and

all other types of anticipated human behavior, merely motivated by feeling, absent the Ten Commandments.

Ancient articles of faith, Deities, turn out to be associated with feelings, positive or negative, some emanating from earthly adverse occurrences/events.

Examples (Greek Deity (Roman)):

Zeus (Jupiter) – Sky, thunder; **Aphrodite (Venus)** – Love, beauty; **Poseidon (Neptune)** – Sea, earthquake; **Hera (Juno)** – Marriage, queenship; **Ares (Mars)** – War.

Interestingly, most names relating to *Ham* in the Bible originated in Africa: (“And the sons of Ham: Kush, and Egypt and Put”, Genesis 10:6; all names of African countries, past or present). Abraham’s Hagar, mother of Ishmael, originated in Egypt (Genesis 16:1). Therefore, Jewish writings traditionally associate *Ham* with Africa.

This mode of human contact with reality, *Ham*, is also widely observed in Africa, where tribes have been engaged in constant wars, including atrocities, for centuries (to some degree, same applies to present-day Africa).

(2) Japheth

Humans **perceiving** reality results in two:

- **Describing** reality;
- **Understanding** reality and **controlling** it.

The first item results in art; The second (understand and control) results in science and technology, respectively.

Jewish tradition historically associates *Japheth* with Europe.

Indeed, this mode of human contact with reality, *Japheth*, is largely observed in Europe, the cradle of art, science and technology, and main source for progress in the latter two (at least until after World War II).

It seems obvious (to me, personally) that reacting to **perceived** reality, rather than to **felt** reality, constitutes progress in how humankind interacts with reality.

(3) Shem

This is perhaps the most difficult phase in human progress towards its ultimate goal (however this is defined). In this phase, humans cease to be passive with regard to reality (feeling, perceiving), and start actively pouring meaning to it. This is done by delivering names to the various constituents of reality. The process of naming implies that all is significant, none exists in vain.

With this, we connect the Heaven and the Earth:

“In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.” (Genesis 1:1)

Main fruit of this attitude is the concept of the unity of the universe, and, consequently, the birth of Monotheism and science.

We note that a major figure to inject the idea of general physical laws, applying to all of nature, and consequently the birth of modern science, was Isaak Newton, an extremely religious personality, carrying as his first name, perhaps not accidentally, a biblical name.

The Bible emphasizes, again and again, how fundamental and significant names are to human interaction with reality. Indeed, from the very beginning:

“And out of the ground Jehovah Elohim formed every beast of the field, and every bird of the air, and He brought them to the man to see what he would **call** them, and whatever the man **called** every living creature it was its **name**” (Genesis 2:19).

Later on, the Bible narrates several mini-stories, all relating to how names of biblical figures changed, when circumstance required that. Thus, the names of Avram, Sarai and Jacob transformed into Abraham, Sarah and Israel (respectively), pursuant to detailed circumstance “demanding” assignment of new names to these biblical figures (and others).

Biblical Hebrew, and modern Hebrew, also reflect Jewish tradition of attaching significance to names:

- “A thing” is *Davar*, root of which is to speak;
- “An item” is *Chefetz*, root of which is to want.

Both these words reflect unity, implying that all originate in God’s willing and God’s speaking (or saying):

“And God **said** let there be light and there was light...and God **called** the light Day, and the darkness He **called** Night...” (Genesis 1: 3, 5).

In two verses, from the very beginning of the Bible, God both **says** and **names**!!

And how will human history look like, once humankind has reached its ultimate destiny??

“Jehovah will be king over all the earth;

On that day will Jehovah be one and His name One.”

(Zechariah 14:9)