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# **A Literary Solution to the Name Variations of Esau's Wives**

## **Introduction**

One of the more intriguing phenomena of the Biblical text is the incidence of personal name variations. Some come readily to mind: Abram-Abraham; [1](#) Sarai-Sarah; [2](#) Hosea-Joshua; [3](#) Esau-Edom. [4](#) In these cases, the variations are made explicitly, and, in the first and last cases, for explicitly stated reasons. In many other cases, however, the text simply presents name variations without any indication that the original names had in fact been changed or supplemented. [5](#) These variations appear to the modern reader as stark inconsistencies in the text. [6](#) Such is the case of the names of Esau's wives:

### **Genesis 26:34-35**

When Esau was forty years old, he took to wife

JUDITH DAUGHTER OF BEERI THE HITTITE, and

BASEMATH DAUGHTER OF ELON THE HITTITE.

And they were a source of bitterness to Isaac and Rebekah

### **Genesis 28:8-9**

Esau realized that the Canaanite women displeased his father Isaac.

### **Genesis 36:2-3**

Esau took his wives from among the Canaanite women-

ADAH DAUGHTER OF ELON THE HITTITE, and

OHOLIBAMAH DAUGHTER OF ANAH DAUGHTER OF ZIBEON THE HIVITE.

So Esau went to Ishmael  
and took to wife, in  
addition to the wives he  
had,

And also

MAHALATH  
DAUGHTER OF  
ISHMAEL SISTER OF  
NEBAIOTH.

BASEMATH DAUGHTER  
OF ISHMAEL SISTER OF  
NEBAIOTH

This article will review the extensive but, to this author, unsatisfying efforts of traditional Jewish commentators to resolve the inconsistencies in the names of Esau's wives. It will then propose a literary, plain-sense solution to the problem.

## The Solutions of Traditional Jewish Exegesis

Traditional Jewish commentators have attempted to solve the problem of Esau's wives' name variations by resorting to one or more of three related propositions: (i) that Esau's wives were renamed, (ii) that they had more than one name at a time, and/or (iii) that Esau had more than three wives. The Bible, they maintain, does not pretend to be a complete history of the events it recounts. Rather, it presents only those episodes which illustrate its major themes. Secondary events, such as name changes and subsidiary marriages, are normally alluded to only in passing. Because the ancient reader would have been familiar with the customs of multiple marriages and the changing of names to reflect developments along the life cycle, [7](#) he would not have found the Bible's unexplained name variations to be as puzzling as we do. [8](#)

### Rashi

Thus, Rashi argues that Esau's wives acquired new names or monikers: [9](#)

- Adah, daughter of Elon the Hittite, is the original name of Basemath, daughter of Elon the Hittite. She was called Basemath to indicate that she was wont to offer sweet smelling spices (*besamim*) as incense to idols. [10](#)
- Oholibamah, daughter of Anah, daughter of Zibeon the Hivite, is the original name of Judith, daughter of Beerli the Hittite. Esau called her Judith

so as to deceive Isaac his father into thinking that she had abandoned idolatry. [11](#) "Judith" is taken to be the feminine form of "Judah" ("I will praise [the Lord]"). [12](#)

- Basemath, daughter of Ishmael, is the original name of Mahalath, daughter of Ishmael. She was called Mahalath to confirm the midrashic tenet that one's sins are forgiven (*mahal*) as one enters upon marriage. [13](#)

Rashi felt compelled to identify the Adah and Oholibamah of 36:23 with the Basemath and Judith of 26:34 because 36:2 states: "Esau took his wives from among the Canaanite women." Had Adah and Oholibamah been different from Basemath and Judith, or had they been additional wives, the text would have employed the standard formula: "And Esau took as wives," rather than "Esau took *his* wives." The latter formulation implies that these wives had already been presented to the reader. [14](#)

There are, however, several problems with Rashi's solution.

- There is a contradiction in the motivations behind Esau's renaming of Adah and Oholibamah. Adah was renamed Basemath to underscore that she offered sweet smelling spices (*besamim*) as incense to *idols*; by contrast, Esau changed the name of Oholibamah to Judith ("I will praise [the Lord]") to conceal that she worshipped idols. It is of course possible that Esau married Oholibamah=Judith after he married Adah=Basemath and that his attitude towards the effect of his wives' idolatry on his parents had by then undergone a revision. The question would remain, however, why Esau would not have given Basemath yet a third name -similar in meaning to Judith-to accord with his revised attitude. Moreover, the plain implication of the order of the text announcing the marriages is that he first married Judith=Oholibamah and then Basemath=Adah.[15](#)

- According to Rashi, all the new names appear first in the text, whereas the original names are listed second. In support of this sequence, it would be tempting to argue that, like the name Mahalath, the names Judith and Basemath are both marriage names, and thus, they appropriately appear when Esau's marriages are first mentioned. But Rashi does not make this argument. Indeed, it would tax credulity to suggest that Esau---even Esau---should have broadcast his betrothed's (Adah's=Basemath's) idolatry in the presence of his parents on his wedding day. [16](#) On the contrary, Rashi seems to suggest that Esau renamed Oholibamah=Judith, and also Adah=Basemath, some time after their marriages, after their idolatry had come to irritate his parents. This, too, however, would also tax credulity.

· The motivation Rashi suggests for the name *changes-the wives' idolatry-is* not otherwise apparent in the text. It is certainly possible that

it was Esau's wives' idolatry which disturbed Isaac and Rebekah, but it might equally have been some other errant trait, behavior or condition. Although several midrashic sources claim that Judith and Basemath were indeed idolatrous, [17](#) their interpretations do not appear to be offered as the plain meaning of the text.

### ***Ibn Ezra and Rashbam***

Ibn Ezra dissents in part from Rashi's position. He agrees that Adah, daughter of Elon, is Basemath, daughter of Elon; she had two names. Likewise, Basemath, daughter of Ishmael, is Mahalath, daughter of Ishmael; she also had two names. "The are hundreds of such instances in Scripture. . . . [Therefore] do not be surprised [at this phenomenon]," and it needs no further explication. [18](#) But he contends that Oholibamah, daughter of Anah, daughter of Zibeon the Hivite, is not Judith, daughter of Beerli the Hittite. Judith did not qualify for mention in the genealogical lists of Gen. 36 because she was childless and the lists are concerned primarily with Esau's offspring. [19](#) Oholibamah, who takes Judith's place in the lists, was Esau's fourth wife.

Ibn Ezra does not tell us what happened to Judith. Nor does he tell us when Esau married Oholibamah—was it before or after he married Mahalath? These lacunae are filled by Rashbam: Judith died childless after Esau married Mahalath=Basemath daughter of Ishmael. Esau then moved from Canaan to Se'ir where he married Oholibamah. [20](#)

According to Ramban, Ibn Ezra felt compelled to depart from Rashi's interpretation because Rashi does not explain how Esau could have accomplished a change in the name not only of Judith but also of her father. Moreover, Rashi's interpretation results in Basemath being the unobjectionable original name of the pedigreed and acceptable daughter of Ishmael (which Esau changed to Mahalath only to connote his own repentance), while at the same time it is the derogatory epithet pinned on the unpedigreed and unacceptable daughter of Elon the Hittite, an inconsistency that Ibn Ezra regards as untenable. [21](#)

Ibn Ezra's solution, however, does not alleviate either of these objections. Rather, it actually opens the possibility that Judith's=Oholibamah's father simply had two names also, and there is no need to conclude that Judith and Oholibamah are different women. [22](#) And it, like Rashi's solution, leaves Esau married to two women each bearing the same half of a double name: Basemath=Adah, daughter of Elon, and Mahalath=Basemath, daughter of Ishmael.

## **Ramban**

Perhaps because of these difficulties, Ramban offers a modified version of Ibn Ezra's explanation. He maintains that both Judith, daughter of Beeri, and Basemath, daughter of Elon, died childless, perhaps as punishment for the bitterness of spirit they caused Isaac and Rebekah. Esau then married the deceased Basemath's sister, Adah, daughter of Elon, as well as another woman, Oholibamah, daughter of Anah, daughter of Zibeon. When, later, he married Mahalath, daughter of Ishmael, he changed her name, which has a repugnant connotation in Hebrew (from holi=sickness), to Basemath, which has a pleasant connotation (from besamim=spices). By this name change, he articulated his love for Mahalath=Basemath-that she was of family and, as a non-Canaanite, not "evil in the eyes of Isaac his father" (Gen. 28:8). Thus, Mahalath=Basemath was Esau's fifth wife.

## **Critique of the Solutions of Traditional Jewish Exegesis**

Unfortunately, all these interpretations rely upon conjectural events that do not emerge from the plain sense of the biblical text, and none comports with the major themes of the narrative:

According to Ibn Ezra/Rashbam, Esau married yet another Canaanite woman after he married Mahalath=Basemath, daughter of Ishmael. This is most unlikely because Esau married Mahalath=Base-math specifically to repent of his previous marriages to Canaanite women! [23](#)

According to Ramban, Esau was bereaved of his original Canaanite wives as punishment for the bitterness they caused his parents; then, unchastened, he promptly married two more Canaanite women (including a sister of one of the deceased!); then, to mollify his parents for his many Canaanite marriages, he married Mahalath, daughter of *Ishmael*; but he renamed her Basemath after one of the deceased Canaanite wives who had caused his parents so much bitterness! This, too, is most unlikely.

## **Towards a Literary, Plain-Sense Solution**

The search for a plausible, plain-sense solution to the problem of Esau's wives' name variations must build upon the textual cues and the major themes of the biblical narrative. [.24](#)

As the text reports, Esau decided to take a third wife because his first and second wives, who were Canaanite, displeased his parents. He *chose his* cousin, the daughter of Ishmael his uncle. Although her pedigree was acceptable to his parents, her name happened to be identical to that of his second wife-Basemath. [25](#) Therefore, he renamed her Mahalath. [26](#)

The name Mahalath derives from the biblical verb *halah* (piel, *hillah*), "to make (the face of someone) sweet or pleasant," and by extension, "to induce to show favor in place of wrath and chastisement." [27](#) Aptly chosen by Esau, Mahalath retains a shared meaning with Basemath (=sweet smelling spices, incense) while at the same time implying, as Rashi suggested, a new meaning: *mahal* ("to [bring] forgive[ness])." [28](#)

Esau hoped that his third marriage would mark a new beginning for him and that his earlier choices of wives from unacceptable backgrounds would be forgiven. [29](#) He did not rest content, therefore, with renaming only his third wife. Lest this name change 'appear to have been opportunistic-to ameliorate the untenable coincidence of his being married to two women bearing the same name, Basemath-he also renamed his other wives. The change of their names, from Judith and Basemath to Oholibamah and Adah, further signaled to his parents that his change of heart was sincere. [30](#)

Oholibamah may be rendered "my tent (*oholi*) is a shrine (*bamah*=high place, altar, shrine)." [31](#) Adah may be derived from '*adah*, "to cross over, pass on, advance"; [32](#) however, the significance of this name does not lie solely in its meaning but also in its history. Adah was the name of Lamech's first wife who bore him Jabal, "the ancestor of those who dwell in tents. . . ." (Gen. 4:19,20).

In the biblical narrative until this point, Jacob, Esau's younger twin brother who was ultimately favored by their parents, is described as a humble dweller of tents; Esau, by contrast, is portrayed as a fierce man of the field (Gen. 25:28). Esau now renamed his first wives so as to associate them with the theme of "tents." [33](#) Esau, "the man of the field," the hunter, thus gave notice to his parents that he was forsaking the wildness of the field and would join his brother Jacob as a humble "dweller of tents."

The text supplies additional clues that Judith and Basemath were the wives' original names. The preceding episode told of Isaac's experiences in the field (Gen. 26:13 ff"). He entered into a treaty with a local potentate, Abimelech the Philistine, and his servants dug wells. The text specifically relates that his servants told him "about the well" (*'al odot ha-be'er*) which they dug near Beersheba (Gen. 26:32-33; see also 26:15, 18-23, 25). This

phrase mimics the name, Judith, daughter of Beerli (*Yehudit bat Be'eri*). [34](#) Likewise, the text calls the oath, which bound Isaac and Abimelech to their treaty, an *'alah* (Gen. 26:28). This term mimics the name of Basemath's father, Elon.

These wordplays are designed as notices to the reader of an essential connection between Isaac's adventures in the field and Esau's improvident marriages. Esau married women from the cultural milieu in which his father circulated in his public role—Judith, daughter of Beerli (from *better*, well), i.e., the well-man, and Basemath, daughter of Elon (resonant with *'Anah*, oath), i.e., the treaty-maker. [35](#) Isaac, whose father Abraham had arranged for him an acceptable marriage to a kinswoman (Gen. 24), neglected to do the same for his own son. In tending to his activities in the field, Isaac devoted insufficient attention to the affairs of the tent. [36](#)

For this neglect of Esau, Isaac was dealt measure for measure: Esau duly neglected Isaac's sensibilities in the matter of his marriages, which caused bitterness of spirit (*morat ru'ah*) to Isaac (Gen. 26:34). And for this insensitivity, Esau, too, was dealt measure for measure: When confronted with Isaac's confirmation of the birthright blessing to his rival twin Jacob, Esau in turn cried bitterly (*marsh*, Gen. 27:34). The wives who had caused bitterness of spirit to Isaac would not bear the beneficiaries of Isaac's blessing (Gen. 28:1-4). [37](#)

This analysis also helps explain the variation in the name of Judith's=Oholibamah's father, Beerli=Anah the Hittite (Gen. 26:34)/ Hivite (Gen. 36:2)/ Horite (Gen. 36:20, 24). The text states that Anah (from *'ayin*, wellspring) was renowned for discovering well-water (*yemim*) in the wilderness (Gen. 36:24). [38](#) He was also called Beerli, the well-man, [39](#) apparently to distinguish him from his uncle who was also named Anah. [40](#)

Similarly, the varying usages, Hittite, Hivite and Horite, may be explained as follows: Hittite is a metonym for Canaanite. Thus, Josh. 1:4 uses the term "land of the Hittites" to refer to the entire expanse of Canaan. [41](#) Hivite means *yoshev havot*, dweller of tent-villages, [42](#) while Horite means *yoshev horim*, troglodyte, cave-dweller. [43](#) Read together, these designations convey that Anah=Beerli the Hittite=Canaanite was a cave-dweller when he lived in the mountainous Horite country of Se'ir (Gen. 36:20), and he was a tent-dweller when he lived in the less rugged land of Canaan (Gen. 36:2). [44](#) Both terms serve to associate him generally with the theme of "tent" in contrast to the theme of "field". They consequently strengthen the association of his repentant son-in-law Esau with the theme of "tent" also. [45](#) In effect, the text is suggesting that the father of Esau's Canaanite wife Judith= Oholibamah ("my tent is a shrine") was a cave/tent-dweller,



notwithstanding that he was also associated with the wells of the field. Esau hoped *this ideal* pedigree would further commend Judith to his parents, especially after her name-change to Oholibamah. [46](#)

## Conclusion

The upshot of this interpretation is a thoroughly harmonious rendering of the biblical text. Far from being stark inconsistencies, the name variations of Esau's wives emerge as subtle supports for a unifying theme of the narrative: the superiority of the "tent" of Jacob over the "field" of Esau, and the ultimate repentance of Esau after his traumatic loss of the birthright blessing to Jacob.

Although later prophetic and midrashic traditions have generally portrayed Esau (=Edom; =Rome; =the Christian Church) as an unredeemed villain and ultimately as the eternal enemy of Jacob (=Israel), [47](#) other strands have seen him more sympathetically.[48](#) Indeed, the midrash cited by Rashi that Esau's sins were forgiven when he married Basemath=Mahalath [49](#) is an example of this more sympathetic strand. It is, in fact, the plain meaning of the biblical text.

## Notes

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- [1](#) . "And you shall no longer be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham, for I make you the father of a multitude of nations" (Gen. 17:5).
- [2](#) . "And God said to Abraham, 'As for your wife Sarai, you shall not call her Sarai, but her name shall be Sarah'" (Gen. 17:15).
- [3](#) . ". . . but Moses changed the name of Hosea son of Nun to Joshua" (Num. 13:16).
- [4](#) . "And Esau said to Jacob, 'Give me some of that red stuff [*ha-adom ha-adom ha-zeh*] to gulp down, for I am famished'-which is why he was named Edom [red]" (Gen. 25:30; see also 36:1,8,19; Deut. 23:8).
- [5](#) . For example, the prophet Samuel's first-born son is called Joel in 1 Sam. 8:2 (and in 1 Chron. 6:18), and Vashni in 1 Chron. 6:13; Samuel's great grandfather is



called Elihu in 1 Sam. 1:1, Eliab in 1 Chron. 6:12, and Eliel in 1 Chron. 6:19. See Ibn Ezra to Gen. 13:7. The son of Rehoboam, King of Judah, is called Abijam in 1 Kings 14 and 15, and Abijah in 2 Chron. 12 and 13. His mother is called Maacah in 1 Kings 15:2 and 2 Chron. 11:20, and Micaiah in 2 Chron. 13:2. Her father, in turn, is called Abishalom in 1 Kings 15:2, Absalom in 2 Chron. 11:20, and Uriel in 2 Chron. 13:2. See Ibn Ezra to Gen. 13:7 and 36:1.

6. Some of the variations in these examples, such as Elihu=Eliab~Eliel, may be understood simply as nicknames or functional equivalents. Cf. the English names, John=Johnnie=Jack, William~Willy=Will=Billy=Bill, Edward=Ed=Ted. Others, however, such as Joel=Vashni, appear to demand a different type of explanation.

7. Cf. D. Z. Hoffmann, *Sefer Beresbit*, Vol. 2, trans. [German to Hebrew] A. Wassertiel (Bnei Brak, 1971), 542 (citing Hengstenberg, Green, *et al.*). See also C. Keil & F. Delitzsch, *Genesis*, trans. J. Martin (Grand Rapids, repr. 1983), 321.

8. Cf. Ibn Ezra to Gen. 4:16(19): "Were we to know the whole Hebrew language, we could still not know all the events [which inspired unexplicated names]"; 5:29; 10:8.

For a critique of Ibn Ezra's general indifference to the potential exegetical significance of variations, see N. Leibowitz, *Iyyunim be-Sefer Bereshit*, 8th ed. (Jerusalem, 1983), 366, n. 7.

9. Gen. 36:2-3, *ad loc.*

10. There appears to be no direct rabbinic source for this interpretation of Rashi's. See *Rashi-Perushei ha-Torah*, ed. C. Chavel, 2nd ed. (Jerusalem, 1983), Gen. 36, n. 183; *Rashi ha-Shalem*, Vol. 2 (Jerusalem, 1988), Gen. 36, and 1-2. Cf. *Midrash Lekah Tov* to Gen. 27:46.

The name Basemath appears to be derived from *bosem*, "balsam, spice, perfume, sweet smell." Cf. F. Brown, *et al.*, *See New Brown-Driver-Brings-Gesenius Hebrew and English lexicon* (Peabody, Mass., 1979), 141-42; L. Koehler & W. Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic lexicon of the Old Testament*, Vol. 1, trans. M. E. J. Richardson (Leiden, 1994), 163. Basemath was also the name of a daughter of King Solomon; she was the wife of Ahimaaz, Solomon's administrative officer in Naphtali (1 Kings 4:15). Cf. the similar names, Ibsam, a descendant of Issachar (1 Chron. 7:2); Mibsam, a son of Ishmael (Gen. 25:13; cf. Basemath daughter of Ishmael, Gen. 36:3, and see below); and Mibsam, a descendant of Simeon (1 Chron. 4:25).

11. See above, n. 10.

12. Cf. Gen. 29:35.

13. See Rashi to Gen. 36:3. Rashi bases this interpretation on the dictum of *Midrash Samuel* 17:1 that the sins of a sage who is selected to a position of authority (who is analogized to a gentile who converts to Judaism), a bridegroom, and a man elevated to political leadership, are commuted upon these respective transitions. As to the bridegroom, the Midrash explains: "'So Esau went to Ishmael and took [to wife] Mahalath,' [Gen. 28:91. But was her name really Mahalath; wasn't her name, in fact, Basemath? Rather, [the biblical text] teaches that she brought him forgiveness (*mahalath lo*) on all his sins." See *Midrash Samuel*, ed. S. Buber (Cracow, 1893; repr. Jerusalem, 1965), 48. Cf. T. J. *Bikkurim* 3:3; *Genesis Rabbah* 67:13; *Rashi ha-Shalem*, *ad loc.*, for variations.

14. See Mizrahi to Gen. 36:2.

15. Gen. 26:34-35: Judith=Oholibamah, Basemath=Adah.

In Gen. 36:2-3, the order is reversed: Adah=Basemath, Oholibamah=Judith. Gen. 36 ranks Esau's Canaanite wives not according to the priority of their marriages but rather according to the number (and perhaps importance) of their offspring, in descending order. Cf. N. Sarna, *Genesis* (The JPS Torah Commentary; Philadelphia, 1989), 249~ See also below, nn. 20, 30.

16. It should be noted, however, that Rashi cautiously states that Adah *was called* Basemath, but that Esau *called* Oholibamah by the cognomen Judith (Gen. 36:2, *ad loc.*), intimating perhaps that Adah was called Basemath by someone other than Esau, possibly by Esau's mother Rebekah. Cf. *Midrash Lekah Tov*, Gen. 27:46; *Rashi ha-Shalem*, Gen. 36, n. 2. If this were Rashi's reasoning, then it may be objected that it would also tax credulity for Rebekah to so stigmatize Adah on her wedding day and for Esau---even Esau---to marry her *nonetheless*.

17. See *Midrash Tanhuma*, Toledot 8; *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer*, ch. 49; *Yalkut ha-Makhiri* to Psalms, Ps. 109:10; *Pesikta Rabbati*, ch. 12; *Genesis Rabbah* 65:4; M. Kasher, *Torah Shelemah*, Vol. 4 (5) (New York, 1951), Gen. 26, n. 139.

Kasher, however, cites the unpublished manuscript of *Remazei ha-Torah le-Rabbenu Yo'el* which interprets the phrase "and they [Esau's wives] were a source of bitterness (*morat ru'ah*; *lit.*, "bitterness of spirit") to Isaac and Rebekah" (Gen. 26:35) to allude to the incense myrrh (*mor*) which Basemath employed in her idolatrous practices. This interpretation may, indeed, be based upon wordplay in the biblical text. Basemath, as noted, means 'sweet smelling spice, incense" (see above, n. ); myrrh, although a fragrant spice used for incense, is also bitter-tasting, whence its name *mor*, from *mrr* (=to be bitter). See, G. J. Botterweck, H. Ringgren & H.-J. Fabry, *The Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, Vol. 8, trans. D. W. Stott (Grand Rapids, 1997), 557-60. Gen. 26:34-35 can thus be read as an ironic pun: Although Basemath's name suggested she would be 'sweet-smelling," in fact she produced a *morat ru'ah*, a "bitter(ness of) smell," to Isaac and Rebekah. For the combination of *mor* and *bosem* or *besamim* in anointing oil, perfume and incense, see, e.g., Exod. 30:23; Cant. 4:14; 5:1,13; Est. 2:12.

18. Ibn Ezra to Gen. 26:34; 28; 36:1; above, n. 8.

19. See Ibn Ezra to 26:34.

20. See Rashbam to Gen. 36:2; D. z. Hoffmann, *Sefer Bereshit*, Vol. 2, 541.

Rashbam further suggests that Oholibamah is a Se'irite woman of Horite extraction. See Gen. 36:20,24-25. The fact that Oholibamah was Esau's last wife also explains why her offspring are listed last in the genealogical lists of Gen. 36:4 ff. Cf. nn. 15, 30.

R. D. Z. Hoffmann follows Rashbam's analysis except he rightly insists that Oholibamah must be Canaanite, like Adah. See Gen. 36:2-3: "Esau took his wives from among the Canaanite women-Adah . . . and Oholibamah. . . . And also Basemath. . . ." Oholibamah is mentioned in Gen. 36:2 immediately after Adah because they are both Canaanite; Basemath=Mahalath, who is Ishmaelite, follows separately in Gen. 36:3. By contrast, Oholibamah's offspring are mentioned last in the genealogical lists of Gen. 36:4 ff., following those of Adah and Basemath, because she was Esau's last wife. See D. Z. Hoffmann, *Sefer Bereshit*, Vol. 2, 540-

42. Cf. R. Naftali Z. Y. Berlin, *Ha'amek Davar* to Gen. 36:2. Moreover, according to Gen. 36:6, Esau took his wives, i.e., those mentioned just a few verses earlier in Gen. 36:2-3, Oholibamah included, from Canaan to live in Se'ir.

21. See Ramban to Gen. 36:3.

22. See above, n. 8. Cf. Rabbenu Avraham ben ha-Rambam to Gen. 36:2, *Perush Rabbenu Avraham ben ha-Rambam 'al Bereshit u-Shemot*, 2nd ed. (Jerusalem, 1984), 52 (on Gen. 36:2). He adds that "Hittite" is a metonym for "Canaanite," which includes "Hivite"; Ralbag, *ad loc.*

23. Perhaps for this reason, Rashbam preferred to consider Oholibamah to have been Horite, not Canaanite (see above, n. ).

Ibn Ezra, it may be argued, implicitly concludes that Esau, after his marriage to Mahalath=Basemath, daughter of Ishmael, perversely reverted to his former fondness for Canaanite women and married Oholibamah. In response, however, it may be pointed out that whereas in the cases of Judith=Oholibamah and Basemath= Adah, Esau had not been expressly forewarned of his parents' aversion to Canaanite women, he was surely on notice thereafter. Just as he was solicitous of his father Isaac's sentiments by refraining from revengefully murdering Jacob during Isaac's lifetime (Gen. 27:41), and he did not carry out his threat thereafter, so, too, he could be expected to respect his father's feelings about not marrying any more Canaanites even after his father's death. Cf. *Ha'amek Davar* to Gen. 28:8.

24. See M. Garsiel, *Biblical Names: A Literary Study of Midrashic Derivations and Puns*, trans. P. Hackett (Ramat Gan, 1991), 14, 20:

[F]rom the biblical standpoint a name is not merely a random and arbitrary label of identification, but rather . . . there is meaning behind a

- name giving; sometimes the author fits it into the text as an integral part of the literary texture. . . . Here we are dealing with a wider scope of potential derivations: sound effects (e.g., alliteration), word play, subtle riddles, concealed meanings, key motifs, etc.-all are derived from names regardless of their reasonable etymology. The biblical writers utilize these potentialities within the literary units in different ways, not necessarily in connection with the act of naming. The intensity and proliferation of this technique is an outcome of the important position that the name had in the biblical world outlook. (Paragraph divisions omitted.)

cr. Enuma Elish 1:8: "(When) they [i.e., the gods] had not (yet) been called by (their) name(s, and their) destinies had not (yet) been fixed," in A. Heidel, *The Babylonian Genesis; The Story of Creation*, 2nd ed. (Chicago, 1951), 18; *Berakhot 1b*: "*shema garem*," the name or a [biblical] personality has an effect upon [i.e., is reflected in the narrative of his life. cr. also Ramban to Gen. 38:3

25. And it would have been doubly intolerable to Isaac and Rebekah for Esau to marry yet another Basemath alter the first Basemath had produced not a sweet but rather a "bitter smell." See above, n. 11.

26. Cf. D. Z. Hoffmann, *Sefer Bereshit*, Vol 2, 541-42: Adah, which may carry the unfavorable connotation, "to go, pass (away)" (cr. Rashi to Gen. 4:19: "*adah is* Aramaic for *surah*, 'turn aside'; *Genesis Rabbah* 23:2), is the original name or the daughter or Elon. Upon their marriage, Esau changed her name to Basemath

(which carries the pleasant connotation, "sweet smelling spices"). When Esau later married the daughter or Ishmael, whose original name was also Basemath, he was obliged to change her name also. He called her Mahalath (which may be derived from *hali*, "trinket," see Prov. 25:12; Cant. 7:2).

Hoffmann correctly notices the problem to be that two of Esau's wives bore the same name, but he does not develop the literary use to which it is put in the narrative (see below). Rather, he abandons this line of analysis and, following Rashbam, concludes that Judith and Oholibamah are different women.

There is another example in Genesis of intra-family renaming due to similarity in the meanings or the names. The text relates that, as she lay dying in childbirth, Jacob's second wife Rachel named her newborn "Ben-Oni" ("son of my vigor, i.e., the focus of my final effort), but Jacob called him "Benjamin" (Gen. 35:18). No reason is given why Jacob renamed the child. It appears, however, that the term on (=vigor) had already been appropriated by Jacob's first wife Leah and applied to her first born, Reuven, whose name Jacob understood to mean *kohi ve-reshit oni* (=my might and first fruit of my vigor; Gen. 49:3). To avoid a conflict, Jacob gave the child a new name that preserved the meaning of the old-Benjamin (=son or [my] right [i.e., strong] hand "son of [my] vigor)-but which had the additional meanings of "son of the south (Canaan)" (Benjamin being the only one of Jacob's children to have been born in Canaan), and "son of (my) days (=old age)." Oni may also mean "my sorrow, my mourning" (Rashi, Ibn Ezra to Gen. 35:18), in which case "Ben-Oni" again posed a conflict with "Reuven," which Leah understood to mean, "The Lord has seen onyi ("my affliction)" (Gen. 29:32). Although the Hebrew roots for "sorrow" and "affliction" are different, they sound similar enough and are close enough in meaning to be interchangeable.

27. See, F. Brown, *et al.*, *The New Brown-Driver-Briggs-Gesenius Hebrew and English Lexicon*, s.v., 11. [*halah*], 318; L. Koehler & W. Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, Vol. 1, s.v., 1 *halah*, 311; Y. Keil, *Sefer Divrei ha-Yamim*, Vol. 2 (*Da'at Micra*; Jerusalem, 1986), 2 Chron. 11:18, s.v., *mahalat*, 646.

The vocalization of Mahalath varies slightly among the Masoretic manuscripts.

28. See above, n. 13. Cf. Midrash on Psalms 53:1; 88:1. Although the root *mhl* (*mahal*), "to renounce, forgive," is first attested in Mishnaic Hebrew, where it displaces the synonymous biblical verb *salah*, there is reason to believe that it existed during biblical times also. See M. H. Segal, *Dikduk Leshon ha-Mishnah* (Tel Aviv, 1936), 5511, 175, 119; H. Albeck, *Mavo la-Mishnah* (Jerusalem, 1959), 162; Y. Aharoni, "Mizbe'ah ha-Levonah mi-Lakhish," *Leshonenu* 35 (1971): 3-6; *ibid.*, *Investigations at Lakhish; The Sanctuary and the Residency (Lakhish V)* (Tel Aviv, 1915), 5-7. But cf. M. Moreshet, *Leksikon ha-Po'al she-Nithadesh bi-Leshon ha-Tanna'im* (Ramat Gan, 1980), 85-86, 209, n. 8\*\*.

Mahalath may also reflect one of the meanings of the biblical verb *hll* (hail, heel) "to begin (something new or different)." See, e.g., Gen. 41:53-54. For still another potential biblical derivation of Mahalath, see below, n. 45. The first that Mahalath may lend itself to more than one relevant name derivation does not detract from the above analysis. On the contrary, the greater the number of

relevant derivations that present themselves, the greater the power of the wordplay in the name.

Mahalath (daughter of Jerimoth the son of King David) is also the name of one of the wives of King Rehoboam (2 Chron. 11:18). Curiously, she had a cousin named Basemath (daughter of King Solomon the son of King David). See above, n. 10. Cf. the similar names, Mahlah (1 Chron. 7:18; Num. 26:33, *et al.*), Mahli (Exod. 6:19, *et al.*) and Mahlon (Ruth 1:2, *et al.*).

29. Cf. Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah, Hil. Teshuvah* 2:4. For the penitent to change his name is one of the ways of repentance ("*mi-darkhei ha-teshuvah*"), "that is to say, [the penitent who changes his name effectively declares:] I am [now] a different person, and I am not the same person who did those [evil] deeds."

30. The literary logic of the order in which the wives' names appear is as follows:

A. Judith and Basemath #1---*original* names by which Esau's first and second wives were known when Esau married them and which they bore until Esau married Mahalath, Gen. 26:34;

B. Mahalath (=Basemath #2*i-new* name given by Esau to his third wife upon their marriage, Gen. 28:9;

B'. Adah (-Basemath #1) and Oholibamah (-Judith)-new names given by Esau to his second and first wives upon his marriage to Mahalath; arranged in reverse (chiastic) order to their original names, Gen. 36:2;

A'. Basemath #2 (-*Mahalath*)--*original* name of Esau's third wife; completes the overall chiastic structure of the order in which the names appear, Gen. 36:3.

This chiastic, mirror-image structure in name *order*---*original*, *new I new*, *original-implies a mirror-image relationship in the names themselves*. Cf. above, nn. 15, 20.

31. See L. Koehler & W. Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, Vol. 1, s.v. Oholibamah, 19. Cf. Exod. 31:6-7 where the name Oholiah is associated with the word tent. See M. Garsiel, *Biblical Names*, 216. Cf. also Ezek. 23 for the names Oholah and Oholibah. See also F. Brown, et al., *See Hew Brown-Driver-Brings-Gesenius Hebrew and English Lexicon*, 14, who renders "tent of the high place."

32. See, Job 28:8; F. Brown, et al., *The New Broom-Driver-Brings-Gesenius Hebrew and English Lexicon*, s.v., I. 'Adah, 723; L. Koehler & W. Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, Vol. 2, s.v., I 'adah, 189. However, both lexicons derive the name from a second meaning of the verb 'adah, "ornament." Cf. the names Adiel (1 Chron. 4:36, *et al.*), Adaiah(u) (2 Chron. 23:1, *et al.*), Elead and Eliadah (1 Chron. 1:20,21), Iddo(') (Zech. 1:1, *et al.*), and Jedo (2 Chron. 9:29

33- The name changes also served to neutralize the wives' negative pedigrees-a change in name implies a change in essence-and so obviated the need to send them away. Thus, Gen. 28:9, in a subtle double-entendre, intimates that Esau took Mahalat . . . 'al nashav, "Mahalath ('to [bring] forgive[ness]') . . . upon his (remain-in~ wives," lit., "in addition to the wives he had." Cf. Ha'amek Davar to Gen. 28:9, s.v., 'al nasbav. . . ; F. Brown, et al., *See New Broom-Driver-Briggs-Gesenius Hebrew and English Lexicon*, 755: the preposition 'al means, *inter alia*, 'in addi-



tion to, ' . . . [h]ence by an easy transition it denotes 'together with' . . . ." Contra Rashi to Gen- 28:9.

[34.](#) For the purposes of the wordplay on *odot*, Judith is taken to be the feminine form of Judah, which is understood to mean, "I will praise (*odeh*) [the Lord]." See above, n. 12.

[35.](#) Although Isaac's adventures in the field here involved Philistines-whereas Esau's wives were Hittite=Canaanite-the text considers the Land of the Philistines to be part of the Promised Land and therefore part of Greater Canaan (Gen. 17:8; 26:34). This narrow congruence aside, the broader point of the wordplays is that the original names of Esau's wives "confirm" that Isaac is not blameless in the matter of his son's irksome marriages.

[36.](#) Cf. Seforno to Gen. 26:34, 28:8; Ha'amek Davar to Gen. 26:34.

There is yet another wordplay to support this connection. The tent emphasizes the "peace" that was expected to flow from Isaac's treaty with Abimelech (Gen. 26:29,31). This happy anticipation of events in the field highlights by contrast the "bitterness of spirit" that was soon to erupt in the tent (Gen. 26:34-35).

[37.](#) Cf. above, n. 17. See also D. Z. Hoffmann, *Sefer Bereshit*, Vol. 2, 540.

[38.](#) *Yemim* is a hapax legomenon. There is considerable debate among the commentators regarding its meaning. It is rendered, inter alia, "mules" (see, e.g., Targum Jonathan, Rashi, ad loc.); "warriors" (see, e.g., Targum Onkelos, Rashbam, ad loc.); "wild doves" (see, e.g., E. Ben-Yehuda, *A Complete Dictionary of Ancient and Modern Hebrew* [New York, 1959/601, 2056]; "hot springs" (see, e.g., Vulgate, ad loc.; W. Gesenius, *Hebrew-Chaldee Lexicon to the Old Testament*, trans. S. P. Tregelles [1847; Grand Rapids, repr. 1987], 351; F. Brown, et al., *The New Brown-Driver-Brings-Gesenius Hebrew and English Lexicon*, 411; A. Even-Shoshan, *ha-Millon he-Hadash* (Jerusalem, 1988), 494); "water" (see, e.g., Peshitta, ad loc.; C. J. Ball, *The Book of Genesis: Critical Edition of the Hebrew Text* [Leipzig, 1896], 93; cf.

E. A. Spenser, *Genesis*, 279-80). D. Z. Hoffmann, *Sefer Bereshit*, Vol. 2, 548-49 (cf. *Ibid.*, 541-42), declines to resolve the different opinions. See also B. Z. Luria, "'Hu Anah Asher Maza et ha-Yemim ba-Midbar' (Gen. 36:24)," *Bet Micra* 30 (1984/85): 262-68, who renders "geyser."

[39.](#) Cf. Gen. 26:19, 32; D. Z. Hoffmann, *Sefer Bereshit*, Vol. 2, 540-41 (attributed to Hengstenberg).

[40.](#) Compare Gen. 36:20 to Gen. 36:24. An analogue exists in the case of Mahli, son of Mushi, who appears to have been named after his uncle Mahli, brother of Mushi, son of Merari, son of Levi. See 1 Chron. 6:4,32; 23:6,21,23; 24:26,30. Cf. below, n. 46.

[41.](#) Cf. D. Z. Hoffmann, *Sefer Bereshit*, Vol. 2, 540, 541; above, n. 22. Also, Gen. 28:1 equates "Canaanite women" with "Hittite women" of Gen. 27:46. And compare Gen. 28:6,8 (";Canaanite women") with Gen. 26:34 (";Hittite").

[42.](#) See "havvah," E. Ben-Yehuda, *A Complete Dictionary of Ancient and Modern Hebrew*, 1460; "hivvi," *Enziklopedia Mikra't*, Vol. 3, col. 45. The Hivites have not been attested as a national entity in any extra-biblical source.

[43.](#) See, e.g., S. D. Luzzatto ("Shadal") to Gen. 36:20 (citing Jerome's commentary to Obadiah: "Throughout the southern region of the Edomites, there are small cave dwellings"). Obad. 3 refers to the Edomites as 'you who dwell in the clefts of the rock . "

The identification by some scholars of the biblical Horites with the ancient Hurrians is subject to considerable dispute. See E. Speiser, *Genesis*, 282-83; C. Westermann, *Genesis 12-36*, trans. J. Scullion (Minneapolis, 1985), 564; "hori," *Enziklopedia Mikra'it*, Vol. 3, cols. 57-63; N. Sarna, *Genesis*, 105-06.

[44.](#) Cf. D. Z. Hoffmann, *Sefer Bereshit*, Vol. 2, 540.

[45.](#) It should not go unnoted that the name Mahalath, in addition to its other possible meanings, may also suggest mehilot, "caves, caverns" (Is. 2:19). With his marriage to Basemath=Mahlath, Esau acknowledged that he was destined to abandon Canaan to Jacob and move on to the cave-country of Se'ir. See Gen. 27:46-28:9; 36:6-8.

[46.](#) See above, n. 33

Anah and Oholibamah are the subjects of still other confusions in the text. Anah is listed as Zibeon's brother (Gen. 36:20) and son (Gen. 36:24). Oholibamah is listed as the brother's daughter (Gen. 36:25) and the son's daughter (Gen. 36:2). Ramban explains that Zibeon named his son Anah after his brother Anah, and Zibeon's son Anah named his daughter Oholibamah after his uncle Anah's daughter, Oholibamah. Hoffmann, however, finds this coincidence unlikely in part because it would result in Timnas, the concubine of Esau's son Eliphaz, being the great-aunt of Esau's wife Oholibamah (cf. Gen. 36:12 to Gen. 36:22). See D. Z. Hoffmann, *Sefer Bereshit*, Vol. 2, 548 (citing Hengstenberg). Perhaps, however, there were also two Timna. Cf. 1 Chron. 1:36,39 cf. the above to Rashi on Gen. 36:2 ff\_ Following a midrashic theme (see, e.g., *Midrash Tanhuma*, Vayeshev I), Rashi attributes these confusions to the gross sexual indecencies characteristic of the extended Esau line. So, Zibeon came upon his mother and sired Anah. Not sated, he later came upon his daughter-in-law, the wife of his son Anah, and sired Oholibamah. See also Rashi on Deut. 32:47.

[47](#) See, e.g., Ezek. 35:5: "Because you [Mount Se'ir=Edom=Esau] harbored an ancient (perpetual) hatred and handed the people of Israel over to the sword. . . ."; Amos 1:11: ". . . because he [Edom=Esau] pursued his brother [Israel=Jacob] with the sword and repressed all pity, because his anger raged unceasing (forever) and his fury stormed unchecked (perpetually)"; Sifre, Num. 69: "Rabbi Simeon Ben-Yohai says: 'It is a rule that Esau [perennially, but with rare exception] loathes Jacob. . . .'"

[48](#) See, e.g., *Genesis Rabbah* 65:16: "Rabbi Simeon bun Gamaliel said: 'All my lifetime I attended upon my father, yet I did not do for him a hundredth part of the service which Esau did for his father. . . .'"

[49](#) See above, n. 13.