

Why do some people in the Bible have more than one name?

There are several people in the Bible who have more than one name. For example, Ahasuerus in Esther 1:1 is known to history as Xerxes. Esther herself was also called Hadassah (Esther 2:7). The reasons vary for the different names carried by some Bible characters.

One reason that some people in the Bible had more than one name is that God changed their names. In the Old Testament, Abram (“exalted father”) becomes Abraham (“father of a multitude”) in Genesis 17:5. Sarai (“my princess”) becomes Sarah (“princess”) in Genesis 17:15. And Jacob (“heel-catcher” or “deceiver”) becomes Israel (“God’s fighter”) in Genesis 32:28. In the New Testament, Jesus changed Simon’s name (meaning “one who hears”) to Cephas (“rock”) in John 1:42. In each case, the name change reflected the work of God in the individual’s life. As God made a promise or changed the nature of the person, He sometimes applied a new name.

Another reason that some individuals had more than one name is that other people forced a name change. For example, “Pharaoh gave Joseph the name Zaphenath-Paneah” (Genesis 41:45) in order to make Joseph more “Egyptian.” Pharaoh Necho changed the name of King Josiah’s oldest son, Eliakim, to Jehoiakim (2 Kings 23:34). Nebuchadnezzar changed the names of Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah to Belteshazzar, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in honor of Babylonian gods (Daniel 1:7). The same thing happened to Hadassah in Persia, whose name was changed to Esther, probably in honor of the goddess Ishtar.

Other names of biblical characters were changed because of an event in a person’s life or to signify the person’s character. The men of Gideon’s town gave him the additional

name of Jerub-Baal (“let Baal contend”) because, in their minds, Gideon had picked a fight with Baal by destroying that god’s altar (Judges 6:32). Naomi, upon losing her husband and two sons in Moab, returned to Bethlehem calling herself Mara (“bitter”). The name Mary is a form of Mara (Ruth 1:20).

Other name changes aren’t really changes at all, but translations from one language to another. Cephas, for example, is the Aramaic form of the Greek name Peter; they both mean “rock.” Joshua is an Anglicization of the Hebrew form of Jesus (see Hebrews 4:8 in the KJV). John is Greek for Jona or Jonah (compare the KJV and the NIV translations of John 1:42).

Understanding that people in the Bible sometimes had more than one name can clear up seeming difficulties. In Matthew 1:9, Matthew mentions Uzziah as the father of Jotham; however, 2 Kings 15:1-7 and 1 Chronicles 3:12 say that Jotham’s father was Azariah. The passages are easily reconciled by reading a little further in 2 Kings 15. The biblical historian makes it clear that Jotham’s father was called both Azariah (verse 7) and Uzziah (verse 32). Different names, same person.

Sometimes, we don’t know for sure why a person had more than one name. Moses’ father-in-law, for example, was known both as Reuel and Jethro (Exodus 2:18; 3:1). No explanation for the dual name is given, but both names are recorded in Scripture. And one of the most famous name changes in the Bible, Saul to Paul, is never explained. Saul is a Hebrew name; Paul is a Roman name. He began to use Paul exclusively during the first missionary journey (Acts 13), after the Gentile proconsul of Cyprus was converted. It is quite possible that Saul/Paul had both names from childhood and began to use his Roman name as he travelled farther and farther into the Roman world (Acts 13:9).

It should come as no surprise that the ancient cultures of the Bible often applied different names to the same person. Today we are just as flexible in our giving of names. A girl named Julia, for example, could be called Julie or Jules; or she could go by her middle name, Anne; or her friends could apply a nickname to her such as “Rose” or “Tweety.” If Julie goes to Russia, she’ll be called Yulia or Yuliana; in parts of Eastern Europe, she’ll be Julija or Julita; in Italy, she’ll be called Giulia. All these names can still refer to the same person.

Believers look forward to a new name given to us personally by Jesus Himself: “To the one who is victorious, I will give . . . a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to the one who receives it” (Revelation 2:17). As we enter glory, our Redeemer will apply to us a new name of His own choosing. “Amen. Come, Lord Jesus” (Revelation 22:20).