

CROWN PRINCE GETS SHAMEFUL NAME

If and when Prince Harry and Meghan Merkle become parents, you can bet the crown jewels they'll hang a royal name on their child. "Prince George XI" perhaps, if it's a boy. Or maybe "Princess Alice" if it's a girl.

Something royal in any case. Something aristocratic, so everyone will know their offspring belongs to monarchy. "Ralphie" and "Betsy" won't even be in the running.

If that's the way it goes with princely folks, then how do you explain "Mephibosheth"? His story is tangled in with that of the first two monarchs of Israel, King Saul and King David.

He pops up several times in the Jewish scriptures in 2 Samuel 4-21. (In some Bibles those chapters are called 2 Kings 4-21).

Let's get Mephibosheth located in the scheme of things. He was the son of Jonathan, and thus the grandson of King Saul.

According to the usual Near Eastern pattern, when Saul died his son Jonathan should have become king.

And when Jonathan died, his son Mephibosheth should have gotten the throne. In other words, Jonathan was the crown prince and Mephibosheth the second in line.

As a matter of fact, it didn't turn out like that at all. Both Saul and Jonathan were killed by enemy troops on the same day.

In the political struggle which followed, David ended up on top. Most of Saul's descendants were eliminated in a bloody coup.

But because he and Jonathan had been long-time pals, David protected his friend's son from any incriminations.

Now back to Prince Mephibosheth. Why would his parents have hung a name like that on him? You see, "Mephibosheth" means something like "he who scatters shame," or worse yet "from the mouth of shame."

No self-respecting prince would name his heir "son of disgrace" or "dishonorable offspring." But that's precisely the flavor of "Mephibosheth."

(This has the making of a poor Rodney Dangerfield joke. "I don't get no respect. When I was born my old man wanted to call me Mort. Because he was so mortified.")

Well, to make a long story short, in all likelihood Jonathan and his wife did not embarrass their son with a name like "shameful offspring." In spite of what it says in 2 Samuel.

More probably they named him "Meribaal," which means "hero of Baal." At least, that's the name remembered in another part of the Jewish scriptures at 1 Chronicles 8:34.

What seems to have happened is that later scribes changed "Meribaal" to "Mephibosheth." Because in later centuries the Canaanite god Baal turned out to be the chief rival of the Israelite God Yahweh.

Subsequent story tellers couldn't stand the thought of giving the false god Baal so much publicity. So instead of letting Baal's name remain favorably associated with a prince, they disguised it.

In their opinion Baal was a shameful god, so they changed the prince's name from "Baal's hero" to "shame spreader."

Their little trick probably didn't fool anyone. Except modern readers who have long since forgotten what the ancient names originally meant.

When all is said and done, what we have here is a peek behind the scenes. We get a glimpse at how the ancient biblical stories may have been modified over the centuries.

In this case it's a rather minor detail, the name of a prince who never made it to the throne.

But it illustrates the pious biases of later editors, who thought they were doing God a favor by tagging a crown prince with a shameful name.

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