Jim and the Bible


Although Nuttall’s was only a medium-sized dictionary, it soon proved to have material in it that could be found nowhere else. For instance, it listed a word SMUCK, defining it as “a crowd of jellyfishes.” Over the years, we have searched through every conceivable other dictionary, without finding any confirmation of SMUCK. In 1951, Nuttall’s was thoroughly revised, and the word SMUCK disappeared in the revision, leaving very little of an imprint on what had been a largely indifferent world.

More interesting than the main body of Nuttall’s were the 107 pages of “appendices” following the extended supplement. Our attention was, at length, drawn to a section of the appendices imposingly entitled “Pronunciation of Hebrew and Scripture Proper Names.” Reading the explanations immediately below this title, we discovered that it was really a misnomer, for the list of names that followed was a list of Bible names only; no others were included. Furthermore, the list was limited to names of three or more syllables, it being the apparent assumption of the compiler that the pronunciation of any one- or two-syllable name in the Bible was self-evident. The discrepancy between title and content should have been a tip-off that all was not well here, and this suspicion was soon confirmed.

Browsing through the list of names, we were stopped by the names XENEAS, XEROPHAGIA, and XEROLYBE. Anyone familiar with the Bible knows that there are only two names in the Bible beginning with the letter X: XERXES and XANTHICUS. The former is an alternate form of the name AHASUERUS, given as a marginal reading in the English Revised Version of the Bible at Esther 1:1; the latter is the perspective and its generally accepted Bible: XOUSIS, found.

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WORD WAYS
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The most obvious explanation for XENEAS, XEROPHAGIA, and XERO- OLYBE would be that they were some of the miscellaneous Hebrew names suggested by the title of the section. However, this explanation was an impossible one, since the Hebrew alphabet contains nothing equivalent to an X, and the names are manifestly Greek in structure.

Our first step in the attempt to explain these alleged Bible names was to consult a much older edition of Nuttall's, published in 1887. Sure enough, the same names appeared there as well! A major investigation was clearly required, and we began a more thorough search.

Rummaging through other old dictionaries, we finally came to the 1847 Edition of Noah Webster's American Dictionary of the English Language, and found that it contained a similar "Pronunciation of Scripture Proper Names" list as a supplement to the dictionary itself. This list, like those in various editions of Nuttall's, included XENEAS, XEROPHAGIA, and XEROLOYBE. The list, however, was much longer than those in Nuttall's, for it included one-syllable and two-syllable names. Therefore, the scope of the mystery was increased by the addition of another two X-names: XAGUS and XYSTUS. These were just as unexplainable as the original three X-names, only shorter.

Examining other portions of the 1847 list, we were intrigued by the name JIM. This was evidently a diminutive of JAMES, and JAMES was one of the Twelve Apostles. Yet, the diminutive JIM had never appeared in any version of the Bible, and it seemed almost sacrilegious to think of JIM in connection with JAMES.

Reading the introduction to the Bible list in Webster's, we came away with the impression that the list was a copy of one in the Key to the Classical Pronunciation of Greek, Latin, and Scripture Proper Names by John Walker, a work published in Philadelphia in 1808. Perhaps we could untangle the mystery by consulting Walker's book.

Finding a copy of the book was comparatively easy, but not too enlightening. The list in Walker's was identical with the list in Webster's. The introduction to Walker's list acknowledged his obligation to a still earlier book, The Scripture Lexicon by Peter Oliver, first published anonymously in England, late in the 18th century, with revised editions coming out periodically, well into the 19th century. Perhaps Oliver's work would finally clear up the mystery.

Obtaining a copy of Oliver's book was a problem. No library in the Chicago area, our base of operation, owned such a copy. Diligent inquiry established that one of the libraries at Harvard University did have a copy, and we sent for and obtained a photocopy of the entire text of the book. When the photocopy arrived, we dove into it with high hopes. The first name that we sought to clear up was JIM, and success was ours. It turned out that all names in Oliver's book beginning either with I or with J had been listed in one, combined alphabetical order, a reflection of the fact that, hundreds of years ago, the letters I and J had been used interchangeably. While Oliver did not include a name JIM, he did include the name IIM, and it was a simple deduction that Walker had made a typographical
or a copying error that changed the intended IIM to JIM. The correctness of this reasoning was supported by the fact that none of the lists including the supposed name JIM included the correct name IIM.

IIM, incidentally, was the name of a city of Judah, given in Joshua 15:29. Another IIM was an alternate spelling of YJIM or YIE-ABARIM, a stopping place of the Israelites mentioned in Numbers 33:45.

With JIM conquered, we confidently turned to the X's, only to suffer a severe setback. Not even one of the five baffling X-names was included in Oliver's book. Not even one!

Somewhere along the line, we had noticed that a few of the strange names in Walker's list and in the lists derived from Walker's could be explained by reference to other authorities. For instance, the lists included a name ZONARAS, certainly not a Bible name. By searching elsewhere, we had established that ZONARAS (Joannes ZONARAS, to use his full name) was a celebrated Byzantine historian and theologian who lived in the 12th century under the emperors Alexis I Comnenus and Calo-Joannes. Might not the five X-names be explained by searching for them in non-Biblical reference works?

We immediately embarked on a very extensive search of that nature, and one of the names, XEROPHAGIA, yielded quickly. It proved to be the name of a very strict fast during Lent, now observed chiefly in the Eastern churches. It did not take much longer to find that XYSTUS was an alternate form of SEXTUS, the name of a number of Roman Catholic popes.

Three names remained: XAGUS, XENEAS, and XEROLYBE. We continued our search, consulting every imaginable sort of reference work, concentrating on reference works of a religious nature. The names remained shrouded in an impenetrable fog. They appeared to be nowhere.

Since the names had appeared in the 1847 Edition of Webster's, a predecessor of the modern-day Merriam-Webster dictionaries, we contacted the G. & C. Merriam Company in Springfield, Massachusetts. The editors of that company are incredibly efficient, and feel some sort of obligation to explain or to justify anything that has ever appeared in a Noah Webster or a Merriam-Webster dictionary.

This was a case in which they failed. The X-names puzzled them just as much as they had us. It was their conclusion that Walker's list was highly unreliable as evidence for the existence of any particular name.

This conclusion is apparently correct, insofar as the appearance of names in Walker's list in the Bible itself is concerned. Yet, it does not answer the question as to what, where, or who XAGUS, XENEAS, and XEROLYBE are or were. Surely, John Walker did not invent these names, especially not names as distinctive as XAGUS and XEROLYBE.

For us, the mystery remains. Can any reader solve it for us? Somewhere there must be someone who can identify XAGUS, XENEAS, and XEROLYBE correctly. Perhaps, that individual is a reader of WORD WAYS. Here's hoping!