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| メタデータ | 言語: eng<br>出版者:<br>公開日: 2021-09-03<br>キーワード (Ja):<br>キーワード (En):<br>作成者: 西川, 健誠<br>メールアドレス:<br>所属:        |
| URL   | <a href="https://kobe-cufs.repo.nii.ac.jp/records/2574">https://kobe-cufs.repo.nii.ac.jp/records/2574</a> |

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# Names that Work: Herbert's Use of the Divine Name and Titles in *The Temple*<sup>1</sup>

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## • Introduction

George Herbert does not invoke the name and titles of Christ in vain. Instead, he seems intent on interpreting them by exercising both his piety and wit, while relishing the pleasure, both spiritual and verbal, that they are capable of giving. This paper seeks to explore how the Herbertian speaker is engaged in the acts of reading, writing and uttering the divine name and titles, as he wonders at the salvific power he believes to reside therein.

Before discussing relevant poems in detail, let us briefly look at the two strands of ideas likely to have influenced Herbert. One is, as Chana Bloch and others point out, the expressive nature of names in the Bible<sup>2</sup>. According to the Biblical tradition the name and titles of God express His salvific power and authority. In the Old Testament the name of God, holy and awesome (Pss. 99:3, 111:9), is something in which lies the ultimate salvation of the Israeli people and which therefore they are supposed to praise (Ps.97:12) and call upon (Isa. 12:4)<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> This is a paper I read at the 5<sup>th</sup> Triennial Conference of the George Herbert Society, held at the Université Sorbonne Nouvelle-Paris 3 from May 18 to 21, under the title, “Names that Work: Spelling the Names of the Savior in *The Temple*”. In publishing this in print I have made a few revisions and corrections.

<sup>2</sup> Chana Bloch, *Spelling the Word: George Herbert and the Bible* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 208-209. Herbert F. Stevenson, *Titles of the Triune God: Studies in Divine Self-revelation* (Westwood, N. J.: F. H. Revell, 1956), 13-15. “Jesus Christ, Name and Titles of” in Walter A. Elwell (ed.), *Baker Theological Dictionary of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI, Baker Books, 2000), 406-412. “Name of Jesus” in F. L. Cross (ed.), *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed., rev.. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 1137.

<sup>3</sup> Citations from the Bible are all from the Authorized (King James) Version.

In the New Testament this salvific link between the Savior's power and His name is maintained. The name Jesus, which means "He shall save His people from their sins" (Matt. 1:21), is the name in which believers are justified (1 Cor. 6:11) and in which they have their sins forgiven (1 John. 2:12). Each of a number of titles to Jesus, too, having something special to say about him, defines who He is and what He does.

Related to this Biblical tradition is a view of language, common among Herbert's contemporaries, that sees it as material with allegorical import. As Martin Elsky has shown in detail, there is a confluence of humanist, neoplatonic and cabalistic interests, which views words as, in the words of Elsky, "material things that belong to the same network of resemblances that endows natural objects with allegorical meaning"<sup>4</sup>. For example, considering the nature of Hebrew as *the* original language for humankind, Du Bartas in *Divine Weeks and Works* attributes mystic powers and symbolic meaning to the language's alphabet in the following way: "Elements (i.e. letters) / Flow with hid sense, points (i.e. marks under the letters signifying vowels) with Sacraments" (Interestingly, Du Bartas also maintains that the Hebrew names of the creatures contain in themselves the story of their nature and as such they can serve as "open books" wherein God's intention can be read)<sup>5</sup>. This view of language as material and allegorical allowed poets like Herbert to treat words, including Christ's name and titles, as a sort of puzzle, which reveals the solution if we correctly put its pieces together.

Familiar both with the expressive nature of names in the Bible and with his contemporaries' physical and symbolic view of language, it must have been natural for Herbert to "spell" the divine name or titles. For the poet the name and titles of the Savior are something whose meaning he can speculate on and explicate in his poems. Furthermore, he sometimes dares to treat them in highly sensuous terms: it is as if he thinks that Christ's name or titles are material objects made of words capable of pleasing both his heart and his senses, and that as such a language which is direct and immediate is necessary to convey the pleasing

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<sup>4</sup> Martin Elsky, "George Hebert's Pattern Poems and the Materiality of Language: A New Approach to Renaissance Hieroglyphics" in *ELH*, vol. 50, no. 2 (Summer, 1983), 245-60. The quoted passage appears on 245.

<sup>5</sup> Guillaume Saluste du Bartas, *Deuine Weekes and Workes*, tr. Joshua Sylvester (London, 1605; tr. Joshua Sylvester. Edited with introduction and commentary by Susan Snyder: Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), vol.1, 437. The lines are quoted by Elsky, 249.

experience. These and other points are what I would like to explore below as I offer an analysis of four poems: “JESU”, “Love-Joy”, “The Sonne”, and “The Odour, 2. *Cor.* 2”.

### • 1 Spelling the Savior's Name: JESU and “Love-Joy”

Let us begin with “JESU”, a poem that takes its title from the name of Jesus itself. In this poem the speaker, in a manner both touching and playful, uncovers the salvific message hidden in the Savior's name and in so doing demonstrates its power that is at once spiritual and poetical<sup>6</sup>.

JESU is in my heart, his sacred name  
Is deeply carved there: but th'other week  
A great affliction broke the little frame  
Ev'n all to pieces: which I went to seek:  
And first I found the corner where was *J*,  
After, where *ES*, and next where *U* was graved.  
When I had got these parcels, instantly  
I sat me down to spell them, and perceived  
That to my broken heart he was *I ease you*,  
And to my whole is *JESU*<sup>7</sup>.

Heather Asals' observation on the sacramental nature of Herbert's language, that “the breaking of the letters of the word...uncovers what is ‘amiss’”, is relevant here, as the name of Jesus, being broken and then reassembled, reveals as well as performs the hidden salvific function of the name's Bearer<sup>8</sup>. When the speaker experiences a broken-heartedness or a “great affliction” [2], the name Jesu, “carved” [2] in his heart (as according to 2 Corinthians 3:3), is also broken, into four letters: J, E, S and U. Yet “spel[t]” [8] (i.e. read, or written down, or both) by the speaker, those separate letters cohere in one sentence, and

<sup>6</sup> For discussion at length on this combination of the spiritual and poetical power, or of the composing of a heart and the composing of a poem, please see my “A Composer Composed: Acts of Divine Composition in George Herbert's Poetry” in *Kobe City University Journal*, vol. 53, no. 3 (2002), 101-121. The discussion on “JESU” appears on 101-2.

<sup>7</sup> Quotations of Herbert's poems are from: Helen Wilcox (ed. ), *The English Poems of George Herbert* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

<sup>8</sup> Heather Asals, *Equivocal Predication: George Herbert's Ways to God* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981), 20.

that sentence does what it signifies: it “ease[=ES]”s the speaker [9] and makes his broken self “whole” [10] again (It needs hardly be said that there was no rigid distinction between *I* and *J* in Renaissance orthography)<sup>9</sup>. Thus, the name of Jesus is shown to have done some redemptive work, in a pun-like “spelling” of that name in which its Scriptural meaning (“He shall save His people from their sins”, as discussed earlier<sup>10</sup>) is applied to the speaker’s own spiritual context. We can also observe that Jesus’s name has helped the speaker in his creative act, too: that name, parceled and then put together, has brought about the successful composition of this poem itself simultaneously with the composure of his heart<sup>11</sup>.

If “JESU” is a little riddle that unpacks for its speaker the personal significance of the Savior’s name, “Love-Joy”, another riddle-like poem, uncovers deeper, more general salvific meanings, this time in His initials. The uncovering occurs in a dialogue about vines depicted on a stained-glass window, the stem of each bunch suggesting the letter *J* and the grapes the letter *C* <sup>12</sup>. The man who invites the speaker to “spend [his] judgement” [5] on those letters, materialized as they are “annealed” [3] in glass, must have done so knowing they stand for *Jesus Christ*, but the responding speaker spells out more: he perceives that it is through the ultimate act of charity by the crucified Bearer of those initials that joy has become possible for humankind.

As on a window late I cast mine eye,  
 I saw a vine drop grapes with *J* and *C*  
 Anneal’d on every bunch. One standing by  
 Ask’d what it meant. I (who am never loth  
 To spend my judgement), said, It seem’d to me  
 To be the bodie and the letters both  
 Of *Joy* and *Charitie*. Sir, you have not miss’d,  
 The man reply’d: It figures *JESUS CHRIST*.

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<sup>9</sup> Nishikawa, “A Composer Composed”, 101

<sup>10</sup> See page 158 above.

<sup>11</sup> Nishikawa, “A Composer Composed”, 102.

<sup>12</sup> I owe this reading to Slater’s note to the poem in her edition of *The Temple*. Ann Pasternak Slater (ed.), *George Herbert: The Complete English Works* (New York: Everyman’s Library, 1991), 448.

Though I agree with Helen Vendler's observation that "The natural object (grapes), its pictorial representation in art (the window), its moral meaning (Joy and Charity), and its divine import (Jesus Christ) inhabit a continuum", I do not share her reading of the last lines in which she hears the speaker corrected<sup>13</sup>. The "Sir, you have not miss'd" by the bystander (who, as I also think with Vendler, is likely Jesus Himself) has a note not so much of correction as of confirmation, or even of commendation, as the speaker discovers in the holy initials what their Bearer has done (Charity) and what He has brought about for humankind (Joy). It is true that the Biblical passages directly alluded to are Galatians 5:22 ("the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy and peace") and 1 Peter 1.8 ("[Him] having not seen, ye love...though now ye see him not...ye rejoice with joy unspeakable"), passages referring, in the words of Bloch, only to "emotions" on the part of sanctified believers<sup>14</sup>, but then there are plenty of Biblical, sacramental and typological associations which can lead the speaker to consider who makes such emotions possible and that behind such Christian emotions are the acts of Christ himself, especially those on the cross. In the New Testament Jesus specifically compares Himself to the vine to which His believers must cling for eternal life (John 15); and wine as Rosemond Tuve amply shows, a typological link between the cluster of grapes borne upon a staff in Numbers 13 and Jesus's body on the Cross (hence "the body" in line 6) has been explored in scriptural illumination and emblem books as well as in stained-glass windows<sup>15</sup>. All those associations can easily invite the speaker to recognize in the annealed letters not only the name of the Savior but also His deed and achievement.

To the believer who is "never loth to / To spend [his] judgement" ("Love-Joy" [4-5]) everything that seems pregnant with meaning will be subject to his "spell[ing]" ("JESU"[8]). In "JESU" and "Love-Joy" Herbert's speaker wittily decodes the salvific significances coded in His name and initials.

## • 2 A Sonnet Summary of Salvific Doctrines and History: "The Sonne"

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<sup>13</sup> Helen Vendler, *The Poetry of George Herbert* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975), 80.

<sup>14</sup> Bloch, *Spelling the Word*, 210.

<sup>15</sup> Rosemond Tuve, *A Reading of George Herbert* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952), 112-113.

In “JESU” and “Love-Joy” Herbert offers a playful yet faith-filled interpretation of the name and initials of Jesus Christ as his speaker spells out the salvific messages hidden therein. The poet does the same thing with titles accorded to Jesus, too. An example is “The Sonne”. Starting with a praise of the English language, the poem discloses, to use R. V. Young’s phrase, “the hidden correspondences of reality” in the sun / son pun, the most important reality thus disclosed being the natures and actions of the Bearer of that double title<sup>16</sup>.

Let forrain nations of their language boast,  
 What fine varietie of each tongue affords;  
 I like our language, as our men and coast;  
 Who cannot dresse it well, want wit, not words.  
 How neatly doe we give one onely name  
 To parents issue and the sunnes bright starre!  
 A sonne is light and fruit; a fruitfull flame  
 Chasing the fathers dimnesse, carri’d farre  
 From the first in th’East, to fresh and new  
 Western discov’ries of posteritie.  
 So in one word our Lords humilitie  
 We turn upon him in a sense most true:  
     For what Christ once in humblenesse began,  
     We him in glorie call, *The Sonne of Man*.

First to be explained is Christ’s work as the Sun: of God and for humankind. Christ as Light from Light brings light to those who live in the shadow of sin: he “chases” [9] their spiritual “dimness” [9] caused by the sin of Adam in their relation to God the Father, and in time, this Good News made possible by this “fruitful flame” [7] has progressed from east to west, just like the motion of the sun, from the Middle East to Europe and further west to the newly discovered lands of the Americas. If that is about the progress, temporal and spatial, of the sun-like glory of Christ, the speaker never fails to muse on His humility as the Son as well: on how His glorious act is achieved by His “humbleness” [13] in

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<sup>16</sup> R.V. Young, “Herbert and Analogy” in Helen Wilcox and Richard Todd (eds.), *George Herbert: Sacred and Profane* (Amsterdam: Free University Press, 1995), 96.

which He, despite being God's only Son, undergoes the Passion as the Son of man. We may add that the speaker may here be considering the Son's specifically verbal humility, too: for the title "Son of Man", is literally a self-designation, a title Jesus Himself "began" [13] to use in speaking of His earthly ministry as well as in foretelling His death and resurrection, and, according to Herbert Stevenson, in the Gospels and in the Acts not found on any other lips than His own except on His questioners' (John 12:34) and on Stephen's (Acts 7:56)<sup>17</sup>. Son of God though he was, Christ not only in His acts but also in His self-appellation chose to be the Son of man, and Herbert may have been aware of this.

Thus, beginning as a celebration of the English language, the sonnet ends as an exposition of the mysteries most central in the Christian soteriology: Christ's divinity and His humanity, His humble death and His glorious resurrection; and possibly Christ's awareness of those missions in what He calls Himself. The doctrines implied in Christ's homophonic son / sun titles are compactly explained by the poet who combines both wit and theological insight.

### • 3 Relishing the Sensuous Power of a Holy Title: "The Odour, 2. Cor. 2"

So far we have seen how Herbert unpacks hidden soteriological implications in the name, initials or titles of Jesus. Yet we also notice that in all three poems above Herbert's speaker is, though on paper, calling the Savior out loud, as he ends each poem with the epithet he has ruminated on: IESU, Jesus Christ, the Son / Sun of man. For the Christian poet, calling the Savior with His name or title must be a practice to be pursued in poetry as well as in life.

It seems that uttering one particular title of Jesus brings to Herbert some unique pleasure, not only to his heart but also to his senses, and that is what is registered in "The Odour". It begins with the speaker's wonder at the immense satisfaction, spiritual and sensuous, that the title, <My Master>, provides. Used in the Authorized Version to render as many as six Greek words (Rabbei, [great one], Didaskolos [teacher], Kathēgētēs [guide], Epistatēs [overseer], Oikodespotes [ruler of the house], Dēspotēs [someone to whom one can render unquestioning obedience])<sup>18</sup>, this title must have been Herbert's favorite, using

<sup>17</sup> Stevenson, *Titles of the Triune God*, 120.

<sup>18</sup> Stevenson, *Titles of the Triune God*, 127-130. Stevenson quotes Herbert's poem in its entirety as an illustration of "the rich significance imparted to the word by its use in the



it, according to Walton, to conclude his speech at his ordination and, according to Ferrar, he was in the habit of adding it whenever he mentioned Christ<sup>19</sup>. In this poem he uses it five times. In marveling at that sweetly satisfying power of the holy title, the speaker uses a language which is itself suffused with sweetness. The word *sweet* and its cognates appear a total of nine times, echoing Biblical passages on the sweetness of the divine name (e.g. Song of Songs 1:3) as well as those on the sweetness of a believer sanctified in that name (e.g. 2 Corinthians 2:15, to which the poem's title alludes).

How sweetly doth *My Master* sound!    *My Master!*  
     As Amber-greese leaves a rich sent  
             Unto the taster:  
     So do these words a sweet content.  
 An Orientall fragrancie, *My Master*:  
  
 With these all day I do perfume my minde,  
     My minde ev'n thrust into them both:  
             That I might finde  
     What cordials make this curious broth,  
 This broth of smells, that feeds and fats my minde.    [ll.1-10]

The phrase <*My Master*> is repeated three times. At our first reading we might take it to denote *the person* of the speaker's dear Master: in its first use the speaker wonders at the pleasure of being called by Him, the second and third uses being the speaker's elated responses. Yet as the phrase is replaced by the non-personal "these" [6] or "these words" [4], we realize that the phrase <*My Master*> is meant by the speaker literally as a phrase, as a title or term of address which, when uttered, brings him not only spiritual but also sensuous joy: the deliciousness, in John Drury's description, of its mumbled 'm' opening into the long "a", followed by the dental crush of "ster"<sup>20</sup>. In savoring this aural/oral

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Authorized Version." (120)

<sup>19</sup> Izaak Walton, *The Life of George Herbert* (London, 1670) in Slater, 361-362. Ferrar's Preface to *The Temple* in Wilcox, 42.

<sup>20</sup> John Drury, *Music at Night: The Life and Poetry of George Herbert* (London: Penguin, 2014), 213.

pleasure which that sweet-sounding title provides, the speaker uses a synesthetic language which appeals to the sense of taste as well as to that of smell: the spiritually and sensuously satisfying title of his holy Master is compared, not only to “Amber-greese” [2], but also to some “broth” [9, 10], which “feeds and fats”[10] its “taster” [3].

In Stanzas 3 and 4 the speaker desires, in a language no less sweet than in the preceding stanzas, that his own title as a believer would acquire a similar spiritual pleasantness. The biblical passage alluded to in the poem's title (“[W]e are unto God a sweet savor of Christ” [2 Corinthians 2:15]) becomes directly relevant, as he wishes that God's term of address to him, *<my servant>*, might obtain “some degree of spiciness” [15]. Let us note that the term *<my servant>*, which at first sight may seem to denote the *person* of the speaker, is found to be used self-referentially, denoting the term itself, as was the case with *<My Master>* in Stanza 1. We may also note that the speaker is considering this sweetening of his own title in tandem with the sweetening or sanctification of his self—he reasons the sweetening of the title *<My servant>* would involve the “pardoning of [his] imperfection” [14] and that it in turn would further sweeten his praise of his Master using that title. A more concrete explanation on how that double sanctification is to occur is given in Stanza 5: it is through the exchange of addresses between a believer and the Savior, the believer's call *<My Master>* answered by the Savior's *<My servant>*, that both the title and the person of the believer acquire spiritual fragrance.

For when *My Master*, which alone is sweet,  
                     And ev'n in my unworthiness is pleasing  
                                     Shall call and meet,  
                     *My servant*, as thee not displeasing,  
 That call is but the breathing of sweet.                      [ll.21-25]

Again *<My Master>* is ambiguous, and so is *<My servant>*. Do they refer to the persons of Christ and of the speaker respectively? Or do these phrases function as titles or terms of address? Perhaps it is more profitable to honor this ambiguity, for the ambiguity reflects the inseparability between a title and the bearer of that title, or between the title and the essence or power of the bearer, that the stanza talks about. It is the invoked title *<My Master>*, holy despite the

“unworthiness” [17] of a believer invoking it, which elicits a response of the divine Bearer of that title and which in turn moves Him to utter the title of <[His] servant>. In other words, it is a believer’s calling out one of the Savior’s titles which works to “call” for the Savior’s “call[ing]” [20] on him, which then “breath[es]” [20] spiritual sweetness at once into the title and the person of the believer. What we see here is the poet’s belief in the salvific efficacy of a holy title: you are literally sanctified in a title of the Savior, in calling Him with that title and being called by Him in return, and that sanctification involves the sanctification of the title with which He calls you.

The poem concludes with the speaker’s wish for this salvific exchange of calls to be a spiritual business he would like to be basked in for a life time. In expressing his wish, he employs a language of trade: the terms of salutation exchanged between heaven and earth are now considered cargos “traffick[ed]” [27] in a sweet “commerce” [29], profitable not only for himself but also for the Master (cf. “with gains” [26]). Moreover, the sense of “traffick[ing]”, of going back and forth, is aurally captured in the *me /thee /me* rhyme, a kind of reversal of My master / taster / My Master in Stanza 1.

This breathing would with gains by sweetning me

(As sweet things traffick when they meet)

Return to thee.

And so this new commerce and sweet

Should all my life employ, and busie me.

[ll.26-30]

Starting with the deep appreciation of the pleasure the title of his saving Master provides, the speaker has moved to reflect how that title does its sanctifying work—his call on the Master eliciting the Master’s sanctifying call on him which in turn elicits a worthier praise—and then hoped for the continuance of that spiritually win-win communication of which, as Terry Sherwood notes, this poem itself is already part<sup>21</sup>. In this way “The Odour, 2. *Cor.* 2” registers Herbert’s sensuous joy in calling a divine name as well as his faith in the name’s spiritual efficacy.

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<sup>21</sup> Terry G. Sherwood, *Herbert’s Prayerful Art* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1989), 69.

## Conclusion

The Biblical tradition, which Herbert must have been aware of, holds that the divine names and titles are inseparable from the essence and authority of their bearers, something in which lies the salvation of believers and which as such has to be honored and praised. Also, in a major strand of Renaissance linguistic thought, words, including names, were considered symbolic objects, capable of imparting meanings if we were ready to “spell” them correctly.

Recognizing the unique power which he believes is inherent in Christ's name or title, Herbert takes it as his poetical task not only to interpret them but also to show in appreciation what they are capable of and to call them out in praise. It is an act of faith for him to unpack their hidden theological significances as well as to register the deep satisfaction they can provide both to the heart and to the senses. Far from taking his Lord's name or titles in vain, the poet through his speaker puts them into both playful and praiseful use as he demonstrates the power of the holy names, in a language that is pious, witty or deliciously sensuous.

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Keywords: George Herbert, Names of God, Materiality of Language