

O LUCIFER!

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Have you ever experienced a desperate need to establish the precise meaning of a reasonably common word? A word ordinary enough to be included in the original, 25,000-entry version of The Merriam-Webster Pocket Dictionary?

If the task seems like a snap to you, then join me in trying to determine just what the name LUCIFER is supposed to mean. As part of the assignment, demonstrate that it is the name of a specific person or place.

The pocket dictionary just mentioned defines the name LUCIFER as a synonym for Satan. The new pocket dictionary elaborates on that definition significantly: Devil, Satan. Since everyone knows that LUCIFER is another name for the Prince of Darkness, that would seem to settle the problem right there. As for proving that LUCIFER is a specific person, Webster's Third Edition defines PERSON as a being characterized by conscious apprehension, rationality, and a moral sense. That describes the Devil adequately, even if we are sharply in disagreement with his moral values or regard his moral sense as perverted.

Alas and alack! It isn't that simple at all. LUCIFER is a Biblical name, found both in the King James or Authorized Version for Protestants and in the Challoner Revision of the Douay-Rheims Version for Catholics. These Bible Versions monopolized the religious world for several hundred years, so that it behooves us to examine them.

In each of these Versions, the name appears once only. Isaiah 14:12 of the Protestant Version reads:

How art thou fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning! how art thou cut down to the ground, which didst weaken the nations!

The corresponding passage in the Catholic Version, Isaias 14:12, reads:

How art thou fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, who didst rise in the morning? How art thou fallen to the earth, that didst wound the nations?

There is no indication, elsewhere in the chapter, that Satan is being addressed; "son of the morning" seems like an odd appellative for him, and we are left wondering whether Lucifer really is the Devil.

To dissipate our doubts, we turn to a major reference work, The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, edited by James Orr (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1949). The entry LUCIFER is defined as the morning star, an epithet of the planet Venus, and we are referred for additional information to section 11 of the article Astrology. Since this comes as quite a surprise to us, we do consult the article Astrology, only to find that it doesn't have 11 sections; it only has three. In section II, subsection 5, we find the planet Venus discussed in relation to Isaiah 14:12. LUCIFER means "light-bearer" in Latin and is a rendering of ancient Hebrew and Assyrian terms meaning "the shining star", an epithet to which the planet Venus has a preeminent claim.

Explaining LUCIFER as a designation for the planet Venus does not help us interpret Isaiah 14:12, for that planet has certainly never weakened or wounded any nations. We are compelled, therefore, to widen our search. However, we make a mental note of the fact that LUCIFER in its role as the planet Venus does satisfy the requirement of being a specific place: an extraterrestrial location, to be sure, but nevertheless a place in the sense of a particular point or portion of space occupied by or belonging to a thing under consideration, a definite locality or location.

An older reference work, The Scripture Lexicon by Peter Oliver -- the Second Edition, published in Birmingham, England in 1787, printed by M. Swinney -- informs us that LUCIFER is sometimes taken for Venus, the morning star, sometimes for Jesus Christ as the light of the world, and sometimes for the Devil. Since Jesus proclaimed himself to be the light of the world (John 8:12), this new definition has an aura of plausibility, although it fascinates us to observe that the same sobriquet can be applied both to Christ and to Satan. We also note that Jesus Christ is a specific person, in accordance with the Websterian definition previously quoted as well as with another Websterian definition: the unitary personality of Christ that unites the divine and human natures. Furthermore, the phrase "person of Christ" occurs in the Bible itself (2 Corinthians 2:10).

The continuing proliferation of meanings for LUCIFER requires us to continue our investigation. So far, we have nothing that will fit the context of Isaiah 14:12.

We turn to the Dictionary of the Bible edited by James Hastings, revised edition by Frederick C. Grant and H.H. Rowley (Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1963). This work patiently explains that the identification of LUCIFER with the planet Venus is incorrect for a variety of reasons. Because Venus can never be more than 47° away from the sun as seen from the earth, it is never more than half-way from horizon to zenith, and cannot be described as falling from a great height. Furthermore, the daily reappearance of Venus in the sky clashes with the idea of a fall to utter ruin conveyed by the passage in Isaiah. Fitting the Biblical description far better is the planet Jupiter, which reaches any height in the night sky, and also disappears from the heavens entirely for about two months every year, being too near

the sun to be visible. Also, there is an ancient omen according to which the planet Jupiter enters the world below at night, and this idea goes well with the downfall pictured in Isaiah 14:12.

The work cited mentions alternative identifications of LUCIFER but dismisses them as improbable: for instance, Winckler's identification of LUCIFER with the new moon or with the waning crescent moon, on the grounds that the Arabic word for the new moon is HILALU, related to the Hebrew word HELEL being translated by LUCIFER.

We would amiably be willing to go along either with Jupiter or with the moon, if either one explained the Bible passage satisfactorily, which is not the case at all, and note that both are names of specific places in the same way as is Venus.

Let's look at Harper's Bible Dictionary, by Madeleine S. Miller and J. Lane Miller (Harper & Brothers, New York, 1961). It explains that in the third century, the saying of Jesus, "I beheld Satan as lightning fall from heaven" (Luke 10:18) was erroneously supposed to refer to Isaiah 14:12. Hence, LUCIFER came to be regarded as the name of Satan before his fall.

To contradict this information, worthless as it is in our quest for the meaning of LUCIFER as it appears in the Bible, we look into A Dictionary of the Bible, edited by James Hastings (Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1900). Here, we learn that Luke 10:18 must be read in conjunction with Revelation 9:1 to 9:11, where a star falls from heaven to earth, being given the key of the bottomless pit, and that LUCIFER came to be a common appellation for Satan in the Middle Ages. Finally, it is now disclosed to us that the imagery in Isaiah is not Venus or Jupiter or the new moon masquerading as LUCIFER, but a meteor or shooting star, seen as falling to earth from the high heavens. Distressing, if true: by no stretch of the imagination can a moving meteor be interpreted as a specific place.

Can more recent Bible translations throw light on the meaning of LUCIFER? The Revised Standard Version of the Protestant Bible replaces the name LUCIFER with the title Day Star. According to Webster's Third Edition, DAYSTAR is another name for the morning star, Venus. The Confraternity Version of the Catholic Bible replaces LUCIFER directly with the phrase "morning star". We've gotten nowhere.

Referring to the Encyclopaedia Biblica edited by T. K. Cheyne and J. Sutherland Black (The Macmillan Company, New York, 1902) puts us on an entirely new track. LUCIFER is a figurative name for the king of Babylon who, in his pride, boasts that he will ascend to the heavens and make himself God's equal; yet, his fate is to be cast down to Sheol, to the uttermost recesses to the bottomless pit. This identification seems, at first glance, to tie in with the reference to the king of Babylon in Isaiah 14:4, and it also meets our requirement of a name representing a specific person. Or does it?

Babylon endured for many centuries, and was ruled by many kings. Was there a specific one alluded to in what has come to be known as the taunt song in the 14th chapter of Isaiah?

Correlating Biblical and historical events conclusively is a difficult matter. After some searching, we run across Halley's Bible Handbook, by Henry H. Halley (Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1961). It discusses Chapters 13 and 14 of Isaiah as predicting the fall of Babylon, and names the year 536 B.C. as the year in which that fall occurred. The date is slightly inaccurate: as related in The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, Babylon fell to Cyrus the Great of Persia in 539 B.C. The next year, Cyrus granted the Jews in exile in Babylonia permission to return to their homeland, and 536 B.C. marks the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem.

Consulting The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible (Abingdon Press, New York and Nashville, 1962), we learn that the last king of Babylon prior to its fall was NABONIDUS, who reigned from 555 B.C. to 539 B.C. That name is sometimes given in its Akkadian form, NABU-NA'ID. It is this king to whom the Isaian prophecy refers, and who is called LUCIFER. Obviously, the name refers to a specific person.

Have we plumbed the significance of the name LUCIFER to its ultimate depth? No, of course not! In logology, it is always possible to go one step further. Returning to the Encyclopaedia Biblica, we are fascinated to discover that the ode on the king of Babylon, Isaiah 14:4 to 14:21, can hardly have been written by the author of the oracle in Chapter 13. The ode parallels a poem on Sennacherib, king of Assyria from 705 B.C. to 681 B.C., and most probably refers also to Sennacherib, so that the words "king of Babylon" are an error. The phraseology, anticipations, and ideas of the song are alike opposed to the theory of its Isaianic authorship.

The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia points out that the four verses immediately following the dirge over Babylon's fallen king concern Assyria, not Babylon, so that the king alluded to is almost certainly an Assyrian monarch of the 8th century B.C. Since the greatest part of Sennacherib's reign was in the 7th century B.C., we must infer that the Assyrian king taunted was probably Sargon II, father of Sennacherib, who ruled from 722 B.C. to 705 B.C.

Readers are invited to continue the research.