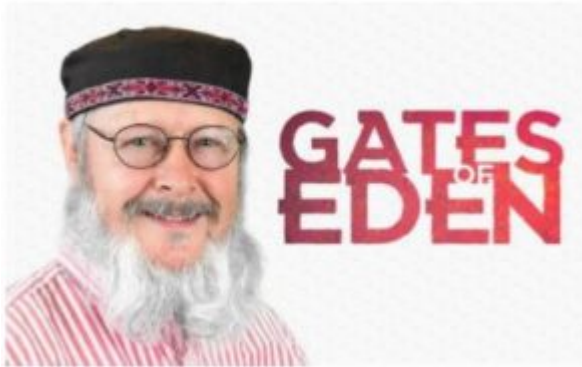


Guest Blog: Linguistic Superstition & The Sacred Name Movement by Daniel Botkin



Any questions about this article can be directed to Daniel Botkin at his [ministry webpage](#). Daniel has a bi-monthly newsletter and speaks at events around the country if you would like to hear him live.

Linguistic superstition is the belief that saying certain “negative” words will produce negative results, and saying certain “positive” words in just the right way will produce positive results. This sort of belief system is most apparent in occult magic. Practitioners of occult magic believe that certain words have an inherent power of force within them which can be harnessed and utilized when the words are pronounced in a precise, prescribed manner. The seven sons of Sceva believed this. When they saw Paul doing miracles in the name of Yeshua, they tried to cast out a demon by saying, “We adjure you by Yeshua whom Paul preacheth.” The demon in the man replied, “Yeshua I know, and Paul I know; but who are you?” Then the man leaped on them and gave them a good beating. (See Acts 19:13-16.)

You would think that Bible believers would know better than to get entangled in linguistic superstition. Sadly, that is not the case. We have seen linguistic superstition manifested by some Christians in the “Word of faith”/“positive confession” movement. Now we are seeing linguistic superstition of another

sort being manifested in the Sacred Name (SN) movement. The SN movement is a movement that began in the late 1930s as an offshoot of the Church of God, Seventh Day denomination. The main focus of this movement (as the phrase "Sacred Name" suggests) is the use of God's Hebrew name. In most SN literature God's Hebrew name is transliterated as "Yahweh" (though at least 38 other variant spellings exist among SN believers). Jesus' Hebrew name is usually mis-transliterated as "Yahshua" (though at least 55 other variant spellings exist among SN believers).

Hard-core SN believers are afraid to utter the words "God" or "Lord" when referring to the Creator. They insist that He must be addressed by His Hebrew name. Most SN literature gives a reader the impression that knowing the correct pronunciation of God's Hebrew name is more important than knowing God Himself.

Much of what I have read in SN literature is dangerously close to the occultic thinking that existed in first-century Gnosticism. *The Oxford Illustrated History of Christianity* (pg. 27) says this: "Heretical Gnostic systems combined magic and astrology with the Bible. The Hebrew name of God, IAO [*the Greek transliteration of YHWH -DB*], fascinated sorcerers by its vowels, always crucial in ancient magic."

Like first-century Gnostic sorcerers, many SN believers seem equally fascinated by the Hebrew name of God, and have made a fetish out of the Sacred Name. This in itself is not sorcery, of course, but it is a step in that direction. Rotherham's *Emphasized Bible*, a translation that has greatly influenced the SN movement, says in its introduction that "the name Yahweh has some inherent meaning of great force" and speaks of "some self-evident force" contained in the Sacred Name (pg. 26, 28). This sort of thinking can lead to linguistic superstition and worse. Noted Hebrew scholar David Bivin, in an article called "The Fallacy of Sacred Name Bibles," writes: "The use of correct formulas and correct pronunciations is very important in magic rites, but not in one's relationship with the God of Israel" (*Jerusalem Perspective*, Nov. -Dec.

1991, pg. 12).

The SN movement has produced a mixture of good and bad fruit. On the positive side, the SN movement has done a lot to help people see that the Sabbath, the Feasts, and the dietary laws are still valid for New Covenant believers. On the negative side, this movement has spawned a lot of rotten fruit. I am not in a position to say whether the good fruit outweighs the rotten fruit or vice versa. I will let God be the Judge of that. I do not wish to judge, but I do need to warn people not to swallow rotten fruit, because it will poison you.

The purpose of this article is not to attack people, but to expose errors. I do not wish to embarrass or publicly humiliate anyone. This is why I will not be citing the sources when I quote from SN writers. If readers wish to know my sources, I will share that information privately.

Some minor errors in a person's thinking can be relatively harmless. Unfortunately, some of the errors in the SN movement are not harmless. The proof of this statement is in the rotten fruit the movement has borne. The rotten fruit to which I refer is primarily a glaring lack of love for brethren. We all know the importance of loving one's neighbor as one's self; we know that the fruit of the Spirit is love; we know about 1 Corinthians 13. We all know the importance of loving the brethren. Yet if it were not for a few loving SN friends whom I know personally, I would have to conclude from SN literature that SN believers *hate* the brethren. And I have been reading SN literature regularly since the mid-1980s.

Indeed, many SN believers do not even consider the brethren their brethren. Christians who do not use the Hebrew name are often regarded as lost at best and as devil worshippers at worst. One large SN organization printed these words in a newsletter some years ago: "Christianity calls 'God's' Son by the name 'Jesus.' Thus, those worshipping 'this son' are committing spiritual adultery!!" This is from one of the more tolerant SN organizations. Other SN writers have flatly stated that Christians who use the words "God," "Lord," and "Jesus Christ" are actually worshipping Satan.

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SN believers do not fare much better when it comes to loving their own. One well-known SN leader who has been around for decades admits this. He writes: "The Sacred Name movement has been characterized by knowledgeable observers as 'a bunch of splintered, divided sects'; and *this is EXACTLY what I found.*" (Emphasis his)

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If you are a Christian reader who is hearing about this for the first time, you might be asking some questions: "These people think that I'm actually giving homage to the devil when I pray to 'God' or 'the Lord'? All the worship I've given to God all these years has really gone to Satan, simply because I didn't address God by His Hebrew name? Where in hell did that idea come from?"

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The answer to your last question is in your last question. However, for the benefit of those who want an explanation of how this convoluted idea developed, let me explain.

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SN believers reject the English words *God* and *Lord* because these are words which, when not capitalized, can refer to pagan gods and to human lords. SN believers think it is disrespectful at best or Satan worship at worst to refer to the Creator by these generic titles. However, the Hebrew equivalents of these two words, *elohim* and *adonai*, are also generic words that often refer to false pagan gods and human lords. Yet the Creator refers to Himself as *elohim* and *adonai* hundreds of times in the Hebrew Scriptures. If He is not offended by the generic titles in Hebrew, why should He be offended by the equivalent generic titles in English? English even has the added advantage of capitalizing the *G*- or the *L*- to distinguish the true Creator from the false pagan gods and the human lords. If the Creator is offended by generic titles, He would be more offended by the uncapitalizable *elohim* and *adonai* than He would be by *God* and *Lord*.

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SN believers imagine a linguistic connection between the English *God* and Hebrew *Gad* ("luck, fortune"). Because the pronunciations of these two words are very similar, SN

believers claim that "God" is the god of good luck. However, the fact that two words in two different languages sound the same is not proof that the two words are cognates. On the contrary, such is usually not the case. For example, Spanish *con* ("with") has no connection to English *cone*; German *nein* ("no") has no connection to English *nine*; Hebrew *ki* ("because") has no connection to English *key*; Yiddish *teler* ("plate") has no connection to English *teller*; Russian *tut* ("here") has no connection to English *toot*, etc., etc.

Concerning the SN believers' ban on *God* because of its similarity to *Gad*, noted linguist and Hebraist Isaac Mozeson, author of *THE WORD: The Dictionary That Reveals the Hebrew Source of English*, wrote this in a personal letter to me: "If the word *Gad* were so terrible per se, there would be no tribe of Israel or prophet of King David by that glorious name. It seems I agree with you on these issues."

SN believers avoid using even the Hebrew *Adonai* because of its similarity to the Greek god *Adonis*. Some refuse to transliterate *Adonai*, even though Scripture uses this word over 200 times to refer to the Creator. I have even seen one SN Bible that translated *Adonai* as "Yahweh." This is not honest translation; it is deliberately misrepresenting what the Hebrew Scripture really says. Isaac Mozeson wrote (in the letter previously mentioned): "I don't shun the Hebrew *ADoNe* (master, lord) + suffix *AI* simply because *Adonis* is a pagan god or because the Brits have a House of Lords."

The Hebrew Bible refers to the Creator as *Adonai* over 200 times. It is linguistic superstition to avoid a word that the Hebrew Bible freely uses. Yes, it is possible that the Greeks borrowed the Hebrew *Adonai* and used it to refer to their god *Adonis*. So what? We know that *Yahweh* is the true *Adonai/Elohim/Lord/God*. The fact that pagans use some of the same nouns for their idols is no reason for us to stop using the words. If the pagans were to say that their gods are "good" and "strong," would SN believers feel a need to avoid these two adjectives and use different synonymous adjectives such as "beneficent" and "powerful"?

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Most SN literature substitutes *Mighty One* and *Master for God* and *Lord*. However, the terms *mighty one* and *master* are every bit as generic as *god* and *lord*. This is evident even in SN literature, which refers to false gods as “mighty ones,” the only difference being capital letters. This is not spiritual progress; it is simply reinventing the wheel.

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The New Testament, by its glaring silence on the “Name” issue, also refutes SN teaching. If avoiding generic titles and using the Hebrew names is so vital to one’s salvation and spirituality, why do the New Testament writers consistently refer to God by the generic Greek titles *Theos* and *Kurios* (words which can also refer to pagan gods and to human lords)? And why do they consistently refer to the Messiah by the Greek form of His name, *Iesous Xristos*? The New Testament writers could have written the Hebrew characters into the Greek script, but there is no solid evidence that they did any such thing. They used *Theos* and *Kurios*, just as the Hebrew Scriptures use *Elohim* and *Adonai*.

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It is very important to note this: *Even when they were directly quoting Old Testament Scripture, the New Testament writers used the generic Greek titles as substitutes for the Sacred Name*. Many Old Testament verses which contain the Sacred Name are quoted in the New Testament, yet the Sacred Name itself never once appears in the New Testament. A generic title is substituted every single time. If the New Testament is to have any bearing whatsoever on our theology, we cannot ignore the fact that New Testament writers used generic titles as substitutes for the Sacred Name.

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The only argument SN proponents can use to try to refute these facts is to accuse “wicked scribes” of changing the New Testament manuscripts. Some go so far as to claim that the entire New Testament was originally written in Hebrew, complete with the Sacred Name, of course. History tells us that Matthew originally wrote his gospel in Hebrew, but there is no reason to suppose that the rest of the New Testament was

originally written in Hebrew. On the contrary, when one considers the fact that the epistles were addressed to congregations composed primarily of Greek-speaking believers who knew little if any Hebrew, the idea seems ludicrous. To accuse wicked scribes of tampering with the text is circular reasoning, and has no basis in historical or linguistic fact.

Theories have been put forth to try to debunk the Greek New Testament. Some SN proponents have claimed that Paul could not have known Greek well enough to write his epistles in that language. Jews did not learn Greek, we are told by SN writers. We know from Acts 21:37 that Paul knew Greek well enough to converse in it. I also found this information in a pamphlet: "The Oxyrinchus Papyri shows that even Jewish children could read and write Greek. The Greek language was common in Palestine, even though the vernacular was Aramaic and the Sacred tongue was Hebrew." It is very ironic that this information appears in a pamphlet written by the late A.B. Traina, the man who is regarded by some as the "granddaddy" of the SN movement.

Some SN believers argue against a Greek New Testament by stating that the Greek text is awkward and clumsy, "poor Greek"; therefore the New Testament must be a translation of a Hebrew original—which, it is assumed, contained the Hebrew names, of course. Do these SN believers know Greek well enough to tell that the New Testament is a poor translation of a Hebrew original? Is the Greek of the New Testament so poor that a Hebrew original must be assumed? I do not know Greek well enough to answer that question, so I will let two scholars who know Greek better than I do answer the question. Dr. Brad Young, a present-day scholar of great repute, states that Paul, in his epistles, "gives evidence of his bilingual abilities by writing in Greek like a native" ("Paul the Pharisee," *Yavo Digest* 19:4, Sept. 1997, pg. 15). Robin Griffith-Jones, master of London's Temple Church and formerly a New Testament teacher at Oxford University, says that Luke used "very sophisticated Greek. He would have been asked to write New York Times op-ed pieces" ("Gospels according to new book," *Peoria Journal Star*, 5/28/00).

In 1978 George Howard wrote an article in *Biblical Archaeology Review*. Howard did not argue for an original Hebrew New Testament in this article, but he did theorize that the writers of the Greek New Testament might have written God's name in the Hebrew characters when they wrote their original manuscripts. A SN believer sent me a copy of this article, complete with his complimentary underlining, arrows, brackets, and exclamation marks in the margins. I marked a few more things in the article myself. In Howard's short essay, I circled the following words: "...suggested that... suggested... argued that... it seems to me... is hardly likely that... In all likelihood... very probably... suggests that... no doubt... Perhaps... may have... Assuming this to be generally correct... In all probability... probably... no doubt... must have... impossible to know with certainty... must have been... must have taken... must have meant... must have meant... was probably... probably... suggest that... it may be that... probably... may be known..."

The appearance of all these words and phrases of ambiguity on just one and one-half pages of text tells me that Howard himself is not very certain of his theory. Yet SN people will swallow an unproven theory simply because it agrees with their doctrine.

One major reason SN believers misunderstand the "Name" issue is because they do not realize the broader meaning of the Hebrew word *shem* (usually translated "name"). When SN believers read a verse that says something about "the name of Yahweh," they think mainly in terms of nomenclature, the word that is used to address someone. *Shem* means much more than just "name" in this narrow sense of nomenclature, however. *Shem* also means the reputation, honor, or character of the person. Any good lexicon will confirm this. Isaac Mozeson also confirms this in his letter to me: "Also SHeM means 'repute' more than merely 'name.' The problems of the 'sacred name believers' will lessen when they consider this."

Even in English we use the word *name* in its broader sense: "You've ruined the family name!" Such a statement does not mean that the person has altered the pronunciation of his surname or changed it to a common name like "Jones." It simply

means that he has brought shame and reproach on the family by his behavior.

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The Scriptures say many things about the name of Yahweh. There are verses that speak of misusing, blaspheming, or shaming His name. There are verses about knowing, glorifying, praising, trusting in, and speaking of the name of Yahweh. These verses are not referring to the correct pronunciation of the four-lettered Tetragrammaton; they are speaking about the *character* and *reputation* of Yahweh. Thus, trusting in "the name" of Yahweh means that we trust in His *character* and His *reputation*, not in the correct pronunciation of His nomenclature. A person who trusts only in the correct pronunciation of the Tetragrammaton is reducing the name of Yahweh to nothing more than a magical incantation.

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Some readers may think that I am opposed to using the name of Yahweh, but this is not the case. In our congregation, we utter the name every Sabbath when we face Jerusalem and say the *Shema*: "Here, O Israel, Yahweh is our God, Yahweh is One." Every day throughout the week, I utter the Name in private prayer more times than I can count. However, I do avoid using the Name in casual conversation, because I truly do regard it as a Sacred Name which should be used only in a sacred context. I have witnessed some SN believers using the Name in a light-hearted manner in casual conversation, even while joking around.

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My main complaint against the SN movement is not the use or non-use of the Name per se, but the fact that the linguistic superstition about "God" and "Lord" unnecessarily alienates and separates brethren from one another. The linguistic superstition discredits SN believers and gives Christians an excuse to reject everything else that is being restored through the Messianic movement – the Sabbath, the Feasts, the dietary laws, etc. Paul warned Timothy about teachers who are continually "doting about questions and strifes of words, whereof cometh envy, strife, railings, evil surmisings

[suspicions]" (1 Tim. 6:4). I cannot think of a more accurate description of the SN movement.

SN writers also discredit themselves in the eyes of intelligent, thinking people by their sloppy scholarship. Some of it is so pathetic that calling it "sloppy scholarship" is actually a great overstatement and a compliment. SN writers often try to prove a point by making long, detailed linguistic arguments based on the details of a Hebrew word. They end up proving nothing to people who know Hebrew. All they end up doing is advertising in the most embarrassing manner their ignorance of linguistics and the Hebrew language – and in some cases, their ignorance of the English language, too.

I know a brother who leads a large Messianic organization based in Jerusalem. I once asked this brother what he thought about the SN movement. "We have scholars in Jerusalem who have done nothing but study the Hebrew texts for their entire lives, and even they are not 100% certain how God's name is pronounced," he said. "And yet we get letters from people in places like Arkansas telling us that they know exactly how the Name is pronounced, even though they have never studied Hebrew." (No offense to people in Arkansas. He could have named any other state.)

One thing that has been cropping up in SN literature in recent years is the alteration of certain Hebrew words. The Hebrew word for Judah is no longer transliterated as *Yehuda*; now it is *YAHudah*. Jacob is now written *YAHakob* instead of *Ya'akov*. Jerusalem is no longer *Yerushalayim*; now it is *YAHrushalayim* (or, according to one writer, *YAHUWSHELEM*). Even Messiah is changed from *Mashiach* to *Messi-YAH*. It seems that whenever SN people see the letter "Y" in a Hebrew word, they think that there should be an "H" after it, so they remedy the problem by restoring the missing "H" that the wicked scribes allegedly removed in their attempt to suppress the Name. Anyone who knows Hebrew can see the foolishness of this. One SN writer (who since has declared that Yeshua of Nazareth was a false messiah), when trying to explain why Joseph's name was really *YAH-sef* instead of *Yosef*, stated that "it doesn't take much imagination" to see that wicked scribes,

intent on hiding the Sacred Name, removed the “H” from the original name of *YAH-sef* and turned it into *Yosef*. Maybe it doesn’t take a lot of imagination to see this, but it certainly takes *some* imagination to see it. It also takes complete ignorance of the fact that the *yo-* prefix is the common, standard prefix that is used to conjugate third-person, masculine singular, future tense verbs in this category.

One of the most bizarre allegations I have seen in SN literature is the claim that the word *Hallelujah* is “a hybrid with one word of Hebrew and one word of Greek.” The SN writer who made this amazing discovery has “unleavened the hybrid” and restored the “correct” pronunciation for us. According to this SN writer, we should be saying “Halle-atah-YaHWaH” instead of “Hallelujah.” This erroneous conclusion would never have occurred if the writer had known that the plural imperative is formed by adding a *vav* suffix to the verb. This is something that a beginning Hebrew student learns in *ulpan* within the first couple weeks of study.

In another article, a SN brother writes about the different names people use to refer to the Messiah. This writer tells his readers that the *Yeshu* form used by unbelieving Jews is made up of three Hebrew letters which can form an acronym for “may his name and memory be blotted out.” This information is true. The three Hebrew words are “*yimach sh’mo v’zikhro.*” (See Stern’s *Jewish NT Commentary*, pg. 5.) However, this SN writer tells us that the three Hebrew words are “yiddish sh’mo w’zither.” This gross mis-information does not appear in some self-published rag that is obscure and unknown to SN people. It appears in a glossy SN periodical that has been around since 1937. If SN believers want to be taken seriously, they have to do better than that. And they have to do better than the SN believer who ended his letter of rebuke to me with these words: “I am shure you mean will, but lets speak the truth in love.”