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New Wine in Old Kings: British Wine Bottle Names and the Old Testament¹

The pervasive influence of the Old Testament on the Kings' and Queens' English is manifest in any survey of English literary usage.¹ Flamboyant biblical personalities have bequeathed us their names as hackneyed proverbial sayings: big as Goliath, wise as Solomon, old as Methuselah, patient as Job. An intriguing instance of the power of the biblical name is the adoption of the names of Old Testament kings, and one antediluvian hero, as British terms for wine capacities.

The terms and proportional capacities which follow are purely colloquial, with no legal and only dubious commercial significance:²

wine/champagne bottle	=	1x
magnum	=	2x
jeroboam	=	4x
rehoboam	=	6x
methuselah	=	8x
salmanazar	=	12x
balthazar	=	16x
nebuchadnezzar	=	20x

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Depending upon whether a wine bottle is reckoned by the quart or liter, a *nebuchadnezzar* of wine might top 5 gallons, the size of the carboys currently used in the retail distribution of bottled water in America.

In 1730, the novelist Henry Fielding used the expression “jorum” to refer to a large drinking bowl. *OED* conjectures that the term derives from the proper name Joram, specifically, the occurrence in 2 Sam 8:10-11, the passage where Joram, the son of king Toi of Hamath dispatched on a diplomatic mission to David, “brought with him vessels of silver, and vessels of gold, and vessels of brass: Which also king David did dedicate unto the Lord”.³ Nineteenth-century British novelists like Charles Dickens used *jorum* as a colloquial term for a large bowl of punch, a potent alcoholic beverage popular in that era. Other royal figures in the Old Testament acquired more specific wine-related attributes in the British Isles.

King Jeroboam son of Nebat, the political adversary of Solomon who established the breakaway northern kingdom of Israel and thus earned the undying wrath of the biblical authors, lent his name to an oversized wine measure, bottle or goblet, perhaps on the strength of his being “a mighty man of valor” (1 Kings 11:28), who “ordained a feast . . . like unto the feast that is in Judah” (1 Kings 12:32), and who “caused Israel to sin” (1 Kings 14:16 and elsewhere).⁴ British use of *jeroboam* as a wine measure dates to the early nineteenth century; French usage, according to *Le Grand Robert*, is an Anglicism.⁵

King Rehoboam, son of Solomon, “broad in folly and lacking in sense” (Sirach 47:23, NRSV), exacerbated the rift between the northerners and the southerners and led indirectly to a consolidation of Jeroboam’s power. Perhaps because “there was war between Rehoboam and Jeroboam all their days” (1 Kings 14:30), it was felt appropriate that a *rehoboam* of wine should rival a *jeroboam* by a factor of two. As a

measure of wine, the term *rehoboam* can be traced to the mid nineteenth century, where it appears to have originated in British usage.⁶

Methuselah, the son of Enoch whose 969-year life span (Genesis 5:21-22, 25-27) has become an occidental byword for matchless longevity, never acquired royal standing in any tradition, and so strikes a discordant note in this catalogue of royal biblical worthies. Presumably the superlative nature of his life span recommended his name as an appropriate moniker for an eight-fold wine bottle. I cannot trace this usage prior to the early twentieth century;⁷ if it was borrowed from the French, their customary rendering of the name as Mathusalem yielded to the familiar KJV Methuselah.

The biblical name Salmanazar removes us both from the sphere of the kings of Israel and Judah, and from the linguistic milieu of the KJV. Shalmaneser V of Assyria laid siege to Samaria, the capital city of Israel (2 Kings 17:3; 18:9) and is credited by the author of 2 Esdras with the exile of nine of the tribes of Israel (2 Esdras 13:40). Unlike the KJV Shalmaneser, Salmanasar is the form of the name in the Latin Vulgate translation, and we must seek the origin of British *salmanazar* in a country whose popular biblical translations are based on the Vulgate and not the Hebrew Masoretic text. Catholic France, whose vineyards historically have sustained the British wine industry, is in all probability the source of the concept and orthography of the *salmanazar*, a wine bottle twelve times larger than the normal *bouteille*.⁸

Vulgate Balthasar, KJV Belshazzar the Babylonian king “made a great feast to a thousand of his lords, and drank wine before the thousand” (Daniel 5:1); worse, he “commanded to bring the golden and silver vessels which his father Nebuchadnezzar had taken out of the temple which was in Jerusalem; that the king and his princes, his wives and his concubines, might drink therein” (Daniel 5:2), with spectacularly

disastrous consequences to himself and his kingdom. The British wine measure *balthazar* or *balthasar*, rarely *belshazzar*, is, like *salmanazar*, a loan from France, where the bon mot for an elaborate banquet is *le festin de Balthazar*.⁹

King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, conqueror of Judah and leveler of the Jerusalem temple, is often identified in the Bible as the one who removed “the vessels of the house of the Lord” to Babylon (2 Chronicles 36:7, 10; Ezra 1:7; 5:14; 6:5; Jeremiah 28:3; Daniel 5:2; 1 Esdras 1:41, 45; 2:10; 6:18, 26). Perhaps more to the point, the book of Daniel portrays Nebuchadnezzar as a vainglorious monarch with a penchant for fatuous overkill, as in his construction of a golden idol 60 cubits in height (approximately 4/5 of a mile; Daniel 3:1); naming a wine bottle twenty times the normal size a *nebuchadnezzar* is peculiarly apt. Nebuchadnezzar is the KJV orthography, unlike the Vulgate Nabuchodonosor; use of *nebuchadnezzar/nabuchodonosor* as a measure of wine is attested in English and French, respectively, beginning in the second decade of the twentieth century.¹⁰

Will other biblical personages be summoned to bestow their names on outsized wine bottles? Truly, “who can cause to cease the bottles of heaven?” (Job 38:37, Geneva Bible version).

¹ See, e.g., P. R. Wilkinson, *Thesaurus of Traditional English Metaphors* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993) 416-422 (Old and New Testaments).

² The following table has been compiled from information gleaned from André Louis Simon, *A Dictionary of Wine, Spirits and Liqueurs* (London: Herbert Jenkins, 1958); British Standards Institution, *British Standard Glossary of Packaging Terms* (London: British Standards Institution, 1959); *OED*; and Paul Robert, *Le Grand Robert de la langue française: dictionnaire alphabétique et analogique de la langue française*, 2nd revised ed., edited by Alain Rey (Paris: Le Robert, 1992), s.v. bouteille. The sources display scant agreement in actual ounce and centiliter measurements, when provided; however, the correlation between the ranking of the proportions and the biblical names is reasonably consistent.

³ Unless otherwise noted, all quotations from the Old Testament are taken from the King James Version, since this was the English version of choice among British Protestants until the late nineteenth century.

⁴ In the context of an article which deals with the cultural appropriation of the Old Testament, the historicity of the biblical individuals and events is irrelevant.

⁵ *Le Grand Robert* 5: 804, s.v. jéroboam. A jéroboam of champagne is said to contain 3.2 liters, whereas a jéroboam of Bordeaux wine holds an even 3 liters. In Italian, a geroboamo is an oversized wine bottle reputed to hold 4/5 of a gallon; *Dizionario delle lingue italiana e inglese*, 2nd ed., edited by Vladimiro Macchi. I Grand dizionari Sansoni (Florence: Sansoni, 1989). *Langenscheidt's New Muret-Sanders Encyclopedic Dictionary of the English and German Languages, Part I: English-German*, revised ed., edited by Otto Springer (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1962-63) 715, "Jeroboam", classes this "Riesenweinflasch oder -glas" as a British loan-word. During the nineteenth century, the unfortunate Jeroboam also attracted the meaning of chamber-pot in British usage, although it was usually shortened to "jerry", with all the unpalatable connotations that word conveys in colloquial English.

⁶ Eric Partridge, *A Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English: Colloquialisms and Catch-phrases, Solecisms and Catachreses, Nicknames and Vulgarisms*, 8th revised edition, edited by Paul Beale (New York: Macmillan, 1984) 970. *OED* 13:530 s.v. rehoboam, also relates the curious fact that a piece of mid-nineteenth century haberdashery known as a shovel hat shared the biblical name of rehoboam.

⁷ Simon 172.

⁸ *Le Grand Robert* 8: 558; *OED* 14:399 s.v. salmanazar. The inference that British salmanazar is a French loan-word is my own.

⁹ *Le Grand Robert* 1:831, cites 1854 as the earliest usage of balthazar for a container holding the equivalent of sixteen standard champagne bottles; the earliest citation in *OED* is 1935.

¹⁰ *Le Grand Robert* 6:676; *OED* 10:274 s.v. nebuchadnezzar.

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