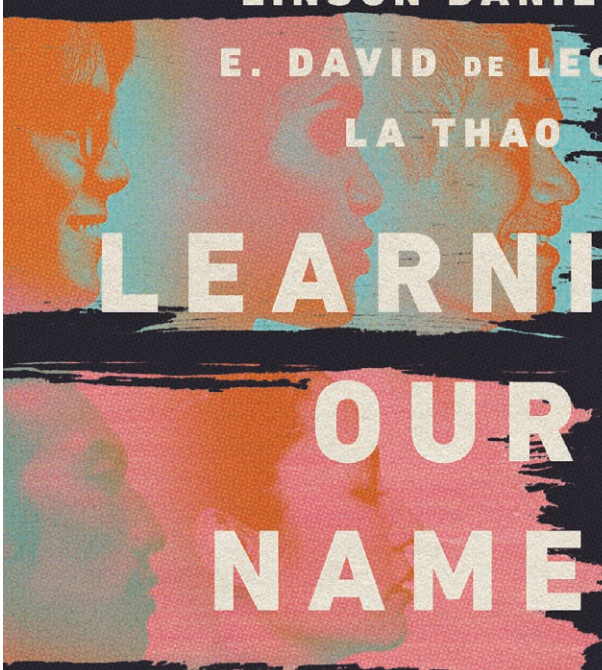


**SABRINA CHAN,  
LINSON DANIEL,  
E. DAVID DE LEON,  
LA THAO**



**LEARNING  
OUR  
NAMES**

**ASIAN AMERICAN  
CHRISTIANS ON IDENTITY,  
RELATIONSHIPS,  
AND VOCATION**



**InterVarsity Press**  
ivpress.com

Taken from *Learning Our Names* by Linson T. Daniel.

Copyright © 2022 by InterVarsity Christian Fellowship/USA and Linson T. Daniel.

Published by InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL.

[www.ivpress.com](http://www.ivpress.com).



## KNOWING OUR NAMES

*E. David de Leon*

**M**Y OLDER SISTER HAD a delightful nickname for me growing up: *Booger*. In fact, she still calls me by this name today, albeit with a shortened, slightly more dignified version—*Boogs*. And while I never stopped to ask her what the origin of this name was, or why she had given it to me, I somehow always knew the meaning behind it. She is eleven years older, and I knew she saw the world differently. After all, I was in first grade when she was getting ready to graduate high school. In many ways, she was a second mom for much of my childhood, and with this great power came great responsibility . . . much of it undoubtedly unwanted.

If names contain some sort of meaning, then what I can learn from my childhood nickname is that I was probably embarrassing to have around, slightly endearing but irritating, and more than likely a tad bit clingy. In giving me this nickname, my sister may have presented a self-fulfilling prophecy about my identity that in many ways I continue to live today, and will perfect in the lives of my sons who will one day grow embarrassed of me (I wholeheartedly look forward to that day).

She called me Booger, and I called her *Ate*, which in Tagalog (a Pilipino language that my parents speak) means “older sister.” On the surface, my calling her *Ate* isn’t just a placeholder to remind me that she is older than me. Embedded in this title-name is an expectation of my deference and respect for her. A deeper layer however is an implicit reciprocity: I am expected to respect her as my elder sibling, and she is expected to express concern, wisdom, and even protection on my behalf. In many ways, my name for her was an honoring reminder that she was responsible for me. And that is what she did for me growing up.

When we name or label others, in a profound way we are making clear to everyone within earshot our relationship with this person. Our names express the affection and hopes we hold for one another. They can also express the disdain and distance we may keep between. Names in this sense communicate a story. As a Pilipino American, I often hear this when Tagalog is spoken to me. (Though both *Filipino* and *Pilipino* are appropriate to use, I use the term *Pilipino* as an adjective and demonym. This is done to reflect the fact that in Tagalog—the language on which the Filipino national language is based—there is no *F* in the alphabet. I do this as an attempt to reclaim the auralty of the language my parents speak.) Though I am not fluent, there is a place of deep longing and vulnerability that is accessed when people speak to me in my parents’ native tongue. I feel the tenderness when my mom calls me *anak* (“child”). I feel the responsibility and care asked of me when the people I pastor and mentor call me *kuya* (“older brother”). Names matter.

### NAMES AND AGENCY

Names provide us and others an opportunity for agency that can lead to life, death, repentance, or love. While it is clear that we exercise agency in the act of naming other people, what about when others name us? In that case, we exercise agency in

how we live into the reality of that name or not. This is true for names that bring life as well as for names that bring death. When I call my older sister Ate, she has the choice to live into that reality. My name for her expresses my expectation and hope, leaving her posed with the option to reciprocate. Her agency is an opportunity for her to express love and concern for me. Our names and the stories they reflect facilitate hope, expectation, and ultimately, relationship.

But what about when people name us negatively? What if the names that are thrust upon us are names that actually lead to oppression, or even death? In the wake of the 2016 US presidential election, as the rhetoric and dialogue around race in the United States escalated, I found myself engaging more on social media about issues of racism. A blog post I wrote led to an extended online conversation with a woman I used to go to church with. She was incredibly uncomfortable with the ways I had called out white evangelicals in their failure to care for people of color well, so she called me a racist. While I am the first to admit I am indeed a person with embedded racial prejudice that I am constantly trying to exorcise, her conflation of my observation and racism was simply incorrect. Her impulse to dismiss my claims led her to pull out the racist trump card and render my observations as invalid. In that moment, aware of my identity, reflections, process, and intentions, I exercised my agency to reject this false name thrust upon me that demanded my silence.

Like this story, sometimes people call us names that are false; on the other hand, sometimes people (often those who know us best) call us out with names that we are living into that are leading to our own death or destruction. This provides us with an opportunity for agency as well. A few years ago, I spent some time mentoring my friend Tim as he was preparing for ministry. Our conversations were always rich and an excellent

opportunity for us to catch up as I led him through reflecting on how he had been seeing God move in his life. One day, during one of our conversations, he said, “So, I’ve been meaning to talk to you about this for a while. But I notice that when we talk . . . you talk about yourself . . . a lot.”

That stung! And I knew he was right. In my inability to lean into moments of silence or listen intently, I cobbled together experiences in my life that related to his in an attempt to make a connection. As well-intentioned as my posture had been, it was not what he needed in our conversations. Tim had the courage and love to name me in that moment: *self-centered*. And while this isn’t a name I wear proudly, his willingness to do so out of trust and respect gave me an opportunity to reflect and repent of a name that I had been living into that was ultimately leading to death. His naming me in this moment gave me an opportunity to exercise agency and adjust my course.

### NAMES AND IDENTITY

There’s a well-known Tagalog proverb that goes like this: *Ang hindi lumingon sa pinanggalingan, hindi makakarating sa paroroonan*—“A person who does not know where they came from will never reach their destination.” Aside from titles, nicknames, and labels, our actual names tell a story as well. Our names speak to our past, present, and future, from where and from whom we have come. For some of us, this is a simple connection. (Asian face? Spanish last name? You’re probably Pilipino!) For some of us, like my friends who are Mixed or are transracial adoptees, this is a more challenging matter that points to a complicated history. The wisdom of this proverb shows us that there is no moving forward without looking back. Understanding our names helps us do this.

***Our names and our past.*** In 1521 Spain had first come to the Philippines and came to dominate the archipelago by means of

what Genaro Diesto calls the “unholy Trinity” of military rule, education, and religion.<sup>1</sup> Over three hundred years later, on November 21, 1849, a decree was made by the Spanish governor-general of the Philippines, Narcisco Claveria y Zaldua, that Pili- pinos were to choose family names from a book compiled by the Spanish colonial government, the *Catalogo Alfabetico de Apel- lidos* (*The Alphabetical Catalog of Last Names*).<sup>2</sup> As many Pili- pinos had by this point converted to Catholicism, many had begun to adopt the surnames of Catholic saints. It was common for members of the same family to each have different last names, as the selection of their last names was described as “arbitrary” by this 1849 decree. In an attempt to establish some order for the sake of government record keeping and taxation, families were ordered to choose a last name from the catalog (containing Spanish words and names, as well as some Pilipino words and Indigenous last names) if their family name had not been in use for at least four generations. Names were literally thrust upon Pilipinos. Even the name of the Philippines itself was named after King Philip II of Spain.

Why this history lesson? Because names, our very literal names, help us make sense of our past. Names help us remember stories. With our names we remember the journey of immi- gration to a foreign land—a land in which my face plus my name are a cause for confusion. My Spanish last name reflects my family history that stretches from the provinces of Luzon to the streets of Metro Manila under generations of Spanish and American colonialism. In my last name, I recall the complexity of the Christianizing of the Philippines, and the ways that American Methodist missionaries and Spanish Catholic friars provided the religious scaffolding for both sides of my family that affected my Christian faith in profound and incomprehen- sible ways. My last name tells me that I come from Elmer and Elvira, Africa and Rosalio, Florentina and Amos, and many



countless names that have faded from memory. My name reminds me of the connectedness to numerous stories that preceded my own, and the histories that my family's lives currently inhabit. These stories contain chapters marked by dysfunction, triumph, disappointment, survival, poverty, plenty, war, hope, displacement, and joy.

Our family names clearly point us to the past, but our given names speak insight as well. They may say something about the preferences of our parents, what they were into at the time they named us. Sometimes our names are reflections of the hopes that our parents have for us. Names act like scaffolding for our lives. In this regard, names can be aspirational—a sort of prayer of intercession on our behalf, leading us to live into the meaning or reality of our names.

Our names, whether their origins are clear or obscure, provide for us an opportunity to look back and make meaning. With this filter, we are able to make sense of the tensions and conflicts of our current moment. Looking back helps us locate ourselves in our family's story and in God's story. This book is an opportunity to explore the power of names and the stories that come with them. Our authors represent vastly different expressions of Asian American life. While our own experiences have no doubt left out the particularity of others' stories, we invite you to step into our histories and reflections, trusting that the shared threads will stir up something in you. I shared a little bit about my name and story earlier, now I'm excited for you to get to know the other authors of this book. They will introduce themselves.

### **LA THAO**

I've been called many names, and I don't even have a middle name. It's just La Thao. Like singing "la, la, la" but people still managed to mispronounce it as "Lay" or "Lao." The kids in



school called me “L. A.” It was amusing to them that my name was so short. It’s not even a short version of a longer name, the way Ed is a short version of Edward or Jo is of Josephine. In Hmong, a tonal language, most people misunderstood my name also. My two older sisters are named Ntsuab and Dlawb, which mean green and white, respectively. Many people assumed my name was Lab/Liab, the color red. I wasn’t red, so my siblings started to think my name meant monkey, which is pronounced the same way as the color red. In another tone, I’ve been called “Laab” or “Larb,” as it is often spelled on Thai and Lao restaurant menus for a meat salad. I also inherited a stinky nickname that means fermented fish sauce. That one is a little harder to explain, but my siblings found a way to make the connection.

But none of these are my name. My name in Hmong is Lag, pronounced with a breathy midtone; I am a sickle. According to my mom, a sickle is an essential tool for harvesting crops. It is a good thing—if something is a good thing, it makes a good name. My name represents the farming lifestyle of my parents and my people. It was their livelihood, their survival.

I am not a farmer like my parents. It’s not who I am in the same way all the names I’ve been called are not my name. I am a child of refugees, born and raised in Wisconsin. I am the youngest daughter, with two younger brothers and five older siblings. Relative to the “good Hmong kids,” we were rebellious and defied our parents a lot. According to Western and American standards, we were decent kids with minds of our own.

Living into my Hmong Americanness, the name La, in a way, names my reality. As a tool used for harvesting, I reap the benefits of the sacrifices my parents made when they fled their home and made the decision to start new lives here. This is both a burden and a blessing. It is a burden to be a tool for their survival. It is a blessing to receive everything they offer me to have

the life they hoped for. This is what it means to be a second-generation Hmong American. This is my story.

### SABRINA S. CHAN

I grew up in Richmond, Virginia, among very few Asian Americans in one of the few Cantonese families in the area. My parents told me often that Chan in China was like Smith in the United States, but that didn't help my sense of otherness. My parents named me 思穎 (Sz-ying), "thinking well" or "thinking better than others," shortened at home to *Ah-Wing*. I miss that; I'm rarely called that anymore as my parents have switched over to using English, and my extended family lives an ocean away. My English name, Sabrina, was taken from the name of the Hong Kong restaurant where my parents had their first date—or so they thought. On a later visit to Hong Kong, they realized the restaurant was actually called Selena's, and they got it mixed up because of the Audrey Hepburn movie *Sabrina*. High hopes, mix-ups, and a movie star—to me these all speak to the journey of immigrating to the United States from the mishmash of southern China and British colonial Hong Kong.

As a kindergartener, we played "Rainbow Brite," off of the trippy early-eighties cartoon. The other girls (all white) always, always made me one of the sprites, Rainbow Brite's nameless helpers, not even one of the secondary characters. Years later, as a young campus minister, I walked by a preschool playground and saw an Asian girl at the front of a line leading the playtime. I felt God saying, "You're not nameless to me, and I see you leading."

As I've gotten older I've learned more of the courageous stories in my family—my great-grandmother was forced to kneel on glass during the Communist takeover in their village; my *Ah-Po* (dad's mom) worked in the rice fields and never had an education, but she led her family to flee across the border to

Hong Kong, bringing up four children on her own. Looking back on the journey, I see how the Spirit has brought empowerment and healing in so many ways as I recognize more of the ways God sees and knows me.

### LINSON DANIEL

My name is Linson Daniel. My parents are immigrants from Kerala, India, and I was born in the great state of Texas. When looking at my name, some wonder if it is backwards, if it is “really” Indian, or if my parents changed parts of it to be more Americanized. All those questions are part of my story. My parents named me Linson by going through the white pages to find an American name. As they thumbed through the massive directory, categorized by last name, they found the name Linson. They liked the sound of it, despite my mother’s hopes of naming me something that felt more familiar to our Indian culture.

So, I was dubbed Linson *Thomas*. Thomas? Yes, there’s more to the story. In the first grade, a friend asked why my Dad and I had different last names. My dad is named Thomas Daniel. Turns out, from my parents’ part of India, a child’s last name is the father’s first name. This is also true for the wife of that man; we all take on the father’s first name as our last name. But that’s a strange and foreign practice in America. So, I went home and told my parents that our names are messed up according to the white kids in my class. Within days, my parents went to court and officially had all our last names changed to Daniel.

Now, I am Linson Daniel.

My name is filled with moments of assimilation both planned and by surprise. All along the way I faced being the model minority in my classroom and the perpetual foreigner. I was Linson Daniel, the straight-A student, while also being Linson Daniel, the Indian kid with the backwards name. (If this leaves you

wondering what my name really means, then you can google it to find out. I think it's weird.) All this to say, I am still discovering and growing into my name. Even today, I will tell the Starbucks barista that my name is Daniel. It may be easier for them, but is it me? No. Somewhere in that moment of decision, I am making tradeoffs and finding my identity in the quagmire of heritage, acculturation, and racialization. But that quick moment of decision is what this whole book is about, so I look forward to diving in further together.

### NAMING GOD

In the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures, the significance of names plays a huge role in understanding the story of God and God's people. Names are so significant that within the Jewish tradition the name of God is too holy to be spoken. This deep reverence for the divine name has led to the title "Adonai" or "my Lord" to be used instead of God's proper name. This deep sense of awe speaks to the power and greatness of God, whose proper name is akin to a sense of being—an identity that is not distant and lethargic but a presence of both transcendent and immanent activity. As early as chapter four in the book of Genesis, we see that people began to "invoke the name of the Lord."

There's a story later in Genesis that speaks to the audacious agency of naming God. In the sixteenth chapter, we see the story of Abram and his wife Sarai unfold. Just a couple chapters earlier, Abram is promised that his family will become a multitude of people, and that through his offspring the world will be blessed. While this promise and vision for the future is hopeful and exciting, the story of Genesis 16 is tragic and in many ways unjust. With the promise from God in mind, Sarai who has not yet given birth to any children, takes action and gives her slave girl from Egypt, Hagar, to Abram to bear

children on Sarai's behalf, forcing Hagar into a role of surrogacy (a role common among enslaved women).<sup>3</sup> Hagar becomes pregnant and "when she knew she was pregnant, she began to despise her mistress" (Genesis 16:4). Sarai, in an effort to deal with the resentment from Hagar, treats her harshly until Hagar ultimately runs away. This story is a tragic example of what happens when people take God's plan into their own hands.

As a slave, Hagar is essentially the personal property of Sarai. She is used and exploited by Abram and Sarai to shortcut God's plan. Pregnant, with no home to go to and a mistress who is actively making her life miserable, she runs into the wilderness and is found by God at a spring. Invisibility is the plight of her life. As an enslaved, foreign-born woman with no rights, invisibility and silence are demanded of her. Ironically, the moment she became noticed by Abram and Sarai is the moment things went bad for her. Her journey into the wilderness is an acceptance of this fate of invisibility. It is in this moment, when she is scared and alone, that God finds her and calls her by name: "Hagar, slave of Sarai, where have you come from and where are you going?" (Genesis 16:8 NRSVue).

In her moment of invisibility and isolation, God calls her by name and shows care for the predicament from which she came. Biblical scholarship is uncertain about the origin or meaning of Hagar's name.<sup>4</sup> Though we know Hagar only by her story, and though her name's meaning may be lost to history, God seems in this moment to be saying to her, "I know who you are!" Not only this, but God gives her an opportunity to speak for herself, the first time we get to hear her words in this story: "I'm running away from my mistress Sarai" (Genesis 16:8). God then tells her to return to the place of her oppression, by her own agency, assuring the well-being of the child she is carrying, and promises that he (her son, Ishmael) will be a force to be

reckoned with in life, the first of numerous descendants that God promises to Hagar.

Because of this powerful encounter with God, Hagar names God *El Roi*, “the God who sees.” Though up until this point God may simply have been the God of her masters and, as an Egyptian, Hagar may have had no relationship with the God of Abram, this all changes. In her moment of desperation, God reveals God’s self to her, showing that God indeed cares for her, her child, and her future. In naming God *El Roi* she undertakes an act of audacious faith and hope. She knows that as she returns to Abram, Sarai, and the world she inhabits as a slave girl, destined for a life of compliance and invisibility, God in fact sees her and knows her. She is no longer invisible.

As names—slave, expendable, exploitable, stranger, and invisible—were thrust upon Hagar, she names God in a way that redeems and mends the brokenness of the names she was given and the life that proceeded from those names. As Asian Americans, we too have carried the names of stranger, exploitable, and invisible. God meets us in our otherness, and we have the opportunity to name God the way that Hagar did. We too, in our encounters with a gracious and loving God, have the opportunity to name God in light of the broken names we as Asian Americans have been given.

### CONCLUSION

Names matter. We have opportunity to exercise agency in how we live into names that lead us into life or reject names that ultimately bring about death. As Asian Americans, looking at our names can give us insight into how we understand ourselves, our families, and our stories. If we know the right questions to ask about our names, we are better able to make sense of who we are now, in the contexts in which we live.

Finally, names matter to God. God sees the broken names we have been called, calls us by our real names, and gives us the power to name. Like Hagar, it is from our broken and distorted labels and names that we name God. As Asian Americans, we can find good news in the reality that God welcomes us, God lavishes on us, and God sees us.



**BUY THE BOOK!**

[ivpress.com/learning-our-names](http://ivpress.com/learning-our-names)