Aminadab in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s THE BIRTH-MARK

Aminadab is an unusual name for Nathaniel Hawthorne to choose even for a denigrated laboratory assistant with a minimal role in “The Birth-mark.” The name is a variation of the Hebrew name Aminadav, which means “my nation is noble” (Kolatch 15). It is an interesting choice, considering that Aylmer, the mad scientist of the story, speaks to Aminadab in a derogatory manner, referring to him as a “human machine” and a “man of clay” (51) and lamenting, in reference to him, “Ah clod! Ah earthly mass!” (55). Aminadab is referenced twelve times in the Bible and is hardly remarkable in those references. In “Aminadab in ‘The Birth-mark,’ ” W. R. Thompson makes the case that Hawthorne’s choice of the name is highly significant because the biblical Aminadab is a “high priest and the head of a family, a Levite, of that tribe which could own no real property and to which was entrusted the priesthood of the Hebrew people” (412–13). As Thompson sees it, Hawthorne’s “Aminadab is a symbol of an early authority which is now discredited; the priestcraft for which he stands is no longer significant” (414). About Aminadab’s comment that he would not attempt to remove the birthmark from Georgiana, Aylmer’s wife, Thompson asserts, “it is a remark rooted in compassion. The old authoritarian religion, in spite of its excesses, had a greater respect for the human personality than has amoral science” (415). Overall, Thompson’s points are interesting and do add depth; however there remains a point of concern. The majority of the twelve biblical references to Aminadab place him in the tribe of Judah, which means he is not a priest. The tribal ambiguity, however, is of less importance than the meaning of the name and how that name connects to the description and role of the character.

If the name Aminadab means “my nation is noble” in the Hebrew language, why does Hawthorne allow Aylmer to talk down to him and his narrator to characterize him as one without nobility? The narrator first describes Aminadab as “a man of low stature, but bulky frame, with shaggy hair hanging about his
visage, which was grimed with the vapors of the furnace” (43). Later, the narrator calls Aminadab’s responses to Aylmer’s directions “harsh, uncouth, misshapen tones . . . more like the grunt or growl of a brute than human speech” (46). As the narrator asserts, and as Aylmer echoes in his own observations, “with his vast strength, his shaggy hair, his smoky aspect, and the indescribable earthiness that incrusted him, he seemed to represent man’s physical nature; while Aylmer’s slender figure, and pale, intellectual face, were no less apt a type of the spiritual element” (43). Yet Aylmer, the intellectual half, fails in his experiment: though he successfully removes Georgiana’s birthmark—which he sees as her only imperfection—she dies as a result. The story ends with the sound of a “hoarse, chuckling laugh,” in the story’s final lines, which implicitly indicates the exultation of the “gross Fatality of Earth” in its inevitable triumph over the immortal essence, which, in this dim sphere of half-development, demands the completeness of a higher state. Yet, had Aylmer reached a profounder wisdom, he need not have flung away the happiness, which would have woven his mortal life of the self-same texture with the celestial. The momentary circumstance was too strong for him; he failed to look beyond the shadowy scope of Time, and living once for all in Eternity, to find the perfect Future in the present. (56)

The triumph of the earthly nature of man is not especially cruel or tragic, nor is it Aminadab with whom the laughter is associated.

The closing lines of Hawthorne’s story argue for the proper acknowledgement of human mortality and earthliness. The focal point of this study is the repeated association with Aminadab and the earth and Aylmer’s reference to him as “man of clay.” This perhaps refers to the noble nation of the earthly, that is, like Aminadab—often called the “salt of the earth.” It may also allude to the association of Adam with the earth, or (and more fitting to “The Birth-mark”) to the images of clay and humanity expressed in the books of Job and Isaiah. The final lines of “The Birth-mark” echo Job:

Can a human being be righteous before God, a mere mortal pure before his Maker? If God mistrusts his own servants and finds his messengers at fault, how much more those who dwell in houses of clay, whose foundations are in the dust, which can be crushed like a bird’s nest, torn down between dawn and dusk. How much more shall they perish unheeded forever, die without ever finding wisdom! (4.17–21)

Clay is mentioned again in Job 10.9, in which Job exclaims to God: “[T]hou hast made me of clay; and will thou turn me to dust again?” Job is expressing the fact that as creations of God we have no right to question God’s work—particularly that he created us as “flawed” and mortal—or to presume to perfect God’s work, as Aylmer does.

This assertion of humans as clay is further expanded in the book of Isaiah. The following passage relates perfectly to the plot of “The Birth-mark”:
Will the pot contend with the potter, or the earthenware with the hand that shapes it? Will the clay ask the potter what he is making or his handiwork say to him, “You have no skill?” Will the child say to his father, “What are you begetting?” or to his mother, “what are you bringing to birth?” Thus says the Lord, Israel’s Holy One, his Maker: Would you dare question me concerning my children, or instruct me in my handiwork? (45.9–11)

Aylmer, unlike Aminadab, has lost sight of his earthiness and presumes to ask such questions and make such assertions. The final observation of the story’s narrator finds support in Isaiah 64:8, which admits, “Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, you the potter, and all of us are your handiwork.”

The birthmark, of course, is emblematic of human mortality and imperfection, the realization of which shocks Aylmer to the point that he becomes obsessed with removing it from his beloved wife’s cheek. When Aminadab first appears in Aylmer’s laboratory and learns of his master’s next experiment, he looks upon Georgiana and mutters to himself, “[I]f she were my wife, I’d never part with that birth-mark” (43). The irony of the story is that Aylmer, for all his intellectual and spiritual qualities, does not have wisdom—which, the biblical passages suggest, comes with the realization and acceptance that humans are clay in the hands of God—and therefore he will die without happiness. In contrast, the denigrated Aminadab, whose nation is noble, accepts his earthiness. God created Adam from earth in Genesis, and Adam’s name is a bit of wordplay: in Hebrew, Adamah means “earth.” Additionally, the English word humility—which denotes a trait exhibited by Aminadab but not Aylmer—is derived from the Latin humus, which means “earth” and “ground,” and carries connotations of “low and insignificant.” As a human, Aminadab recognizes his origins and his requisite humility in the face of God’s will. Thus by accepting his humble humanity Aminadab lives up to his name and ennobles the physical and perceived imperfections of mortal life unnoticed by Aylmer.

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