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# The Revelation of the Divine Name?

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For many years now most Old Testament scholars have held the view that the name 'Yahweh' does not occur in E before Ex. 3, nor in P before Ex. 6.<sup>1</sup> The reason given is that in these two chapters we have two accounts of the revelation of the Name to Moses. E and P are therefore credited with the view that the name was not known previously.<sup>2</sup> Conservative scholars have always opposed this view and in recent years at least two Jewish scholars have also dissented.<sup>3</sup> It is the purpose of this paper to consider the relative merits of the arguments on both sides.

## The Division of Exodus 3

Ex. 3 is usually divided between J and E.<sup>4</sup> The following verses are invariably ascribed to E: 4b, 6, 9-15.<sup>5</sup> The majority take verse

<sup>1</sup> There are a few exceptions like Gn. 17:1 (P); 15:2 (E?); 21:1b (P?).

<sup>2</sup> This does not necessarily imply that 'Yahweh' should not occur in narrative passages such as Gn. 17:1, but that it should not occur in direct speech as in Gn. 15:2. If this verse does belong to E, and if the theory is correct, this must be explained as a scribal alteration or error.

<sup>3</sup> M. H. Segal, *The Pentateuch*, Jerusalem, 1967. U. Cassuto, *Genesis (1-17)* and *Exodus Commentaries*, Jerusalem, 1961 and 1967. Also *The Documentary Hypothesis*, Jerusalem, 1961. His fullest treatment is in an Italian work: *La Questione della Genesi*, Florence, 1934, but this is not available to me. For a good conservative enquiry see J. A. Motyer, *The Revelation of the Divine Name*, IVF: London, 1959 (reprinted 1970).

<sup>4</sup> For the reasons for this we may perhaps take Fohrer as a representative scholar. He thinks the separation into two strands is certain on the basis of the following observations:

(1) According to J. Moses arrives in the region on the far side of the wilderness apparently at the mountain of Yahweh (Sinai); according to E at the mountain of God (v. 1).

(2) In J he sees something to which he draws nearer. Only then does Yahweh speak to him; in E he is immediately called by God as he appears (vv 2ff. 4b).

(3) In J, Yahweh wants to lead the children of Israel out of Egypt (vv. 8, 17); in E, Moses receives this commission.

(4) The deity twice says he has seen the plight of the Israelites and has heard their cry (vv. 7f, 9f).

(5) The repeated 'and he spoke' (vv 5, 6) and 'and now go' (vv 9a and 16, 10) also attract attention (*Überlieferung und Geschichte des Exodus*, Berlin, 1964, p. 29). A detailed examination of these and similar reasons is outside the scope of this paper.

<sup>5</sup> But D. M. Q. Stalker wonders if 9a should not be given to J. Noth and

1 as belonging to E<sup>6</sup> since it contains the expression 'mountain of God' and the name Horeb. Jethro is usually treated as a gloss and Noth remarks that in any case it is not to be derived from J.<sup>7</sup> E therefore becomes

- 1 (Now Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law, Jethro the priest of Midian, and he came to the west side of the wilderness) and he came to Horeb, the mountain of God.
- 4b And God called to him (out of a<sup>8</sup> bush)  
And he said, Moses, Moses; and he said, Here I am.
- 6 And he said, I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob. And Moses hid his face for he was afraid to look upon God.
- 9 And now, behold, the cry of the children of Israel has come to me, and I have also seen the oppression with which the Egyptians oppress them. etc.

This reconstruction cannot be said to be very convincing. There is obviously something missing before vv 9ff: possibly only the introduction to the divine speech, according to Noth. The analysis rests heavily on previously determined criteria and conclusions.

The J account is as follows:

1. (Now Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law (Jethro) the priest of Midian, and he came to the west side of the wilderness.)
2. And the angel of Yahweh appeared to him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a<sup>8</sup> bush. And he looked, and 1o, the bush was burning with the fire and the bush was not consumed.
3. And Moses said, I will turn aside and see this great sight, why the bush is not burnt.
- 4a And Yahweh saw that he turned aside to see.
5. And he said, Do not come near, take off your shoes for the place where you are standing is holy ground.
7. And Yahweh said, I have indeed seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt, and have heard their cry because of their (lit. his) taskmasters, for I know their (his) sufferings.
8. And I have come down to deliver them (lit. him) out of the hand of the Egyptians and to lead them (him) up from that land to a good and broad land, to a land flowing with milk and honey, to the place of the Canaanite, the Hittite, the Amorite, the Perizzite, the Hivite and the Jebusite.

Fohrer think that 'out of the bush' in v. 4b is secondary. R. E. Clements seems to ascribe ch 3 entirely to E. (*Cambridge Bible Commentary on the NEB: Exodus*, Cambridge, 1972, p. 23).

<sup>6</sup> Noth and Fohrer assign only 1bb. to E.

<sup>7</sup> *Exodus* (E. T. by J. S. Bowden), London, 1962, p. 38 (cf p. 37).

<sup>8</sup> The definite article is found even at the first occurrence of the bush in verse 2.

16. Go and gather together the elders of Israel . . . (etc).

Apart from the need for an introductory verse, if v. 1 is ascribed to E, and the unnecessary 'And Yahweh said' (v. 7) this account reads smoothly.

*Ex 3:9-15 (E)*

Arguments for the orthodox critical view are:

(1) The repetition and partial overlapping in verses 14a, 14b, and 15 suggest two or three stages in the history of the text.

14a And God said to Moses, 'I am who I am'.

14b And he said, Say this to the children of Israel 'I am' has sent me to you.

15. And God said in addition ('*ôd*) to Moses, Thus shall you say to the children of Israel, Yahweh the God of your fathers, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you. This is my name forever, and thus I am to be remembered throughout all generations.

(2) In verse 13 *mah shemô* means simply 'what is his name?' The answer should therefore have been 'Yahweh'. Noth<sup>9</sup> believes that v. 15 was the original answer and he notes that v. 15b 'this is my name forever' corresponds to the question.

(3) Verse 14 then becomes secondary. The majority of commentators believe that v. 14a was added first and then 14b since some link was felt to be necessary between 14a and 15.<sup>10</sup> Other scholars believe that 14b was the original answer with 'Yahweh' in place of 'I am'.<sup>11</sup>

Despite the uncertainty as to how our text arrived at its present form this account is attractive in that it explains the repetition 'And God said. . . and he said. . . and God said in addition. . .', and takes the question 'what is his name?' in its apparently plain meaning. It provides, too, a neat explanation of why E does not use the name Yahweh before this point.

Nevertheless, questions immediately arise. For example, in what way would knowing the name 'Yahweh' authenticate Moses' claim to have received a revelation? If the name was unknown previously the elders would have had no way of checking whether God

<sup>9</sup> Also Hyatt, Beer, *et al.*

<sup>10</sup> J. P. Hyatt, *Exodus* (New Century Bible), London, 1971, p. 77, says that 14b 'was an attempt to make a little better sense of a difficult text'.

Noth's view in the English translation seems obscure. It reads 'verse 14a would have been added subsequently as an explanation of the name Yahweh and would have been inserted into the context because of 14b which verbally anticipates the following clause'. He has not explained how 14b got into the text and it seems that '*durch* 14b' should be translated 'by means of 14b'. Later on he calls 14b just a 'redactional transition to v. 15'.

<sup>11</sup> cf C. A. Simpson, *The Early Traditions of Israel*, Oxford, 1948, p. 164.

had really spoken to Moses or whether Moses had invented it.<sup>12</sup> On the other hand if the name was generally known it would have been without value as a proof of revelation. Hence it seems more logical to assume that the name was known only to a small section of the people, probably the elders; alternatively, that the interpretation was known only to this small circle.<sup>13</sup>

Segal objects that it is 'incredible' that ancient Hebrew writers could have portrayed the patriarchs as ignorant of the true name of the Deity. 'Without a knowledge of his true name there can be no true worship'. He says this is proved by the standing expression in the Bible for 'to worship: to call on the name of'.<sup>14</sup> But he needs to show, for example, that *El Shaddai* is not a true name of God.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, we are then forced to ask why men begin to worship Yahweh only after Enoch is born. Actually we may also ask why, if the documentary hypothesis is correct, J portrays men as using the name Yahweh from here only and not from Adam.<sup>16</sup> There are too many uncertainties to come to a confident decision here.

Perhaps the most important question is the actual meaning of *mah she'mô*. Segal thinks it can only be understood as 'What meaneth this name?' Such he claims is the meaning of *mah* in Gn. 21:29, 'What are these seven ewe lambs?', Ex. 13:14, 'What is this?', Jos. 4:21, 'What are these stones?', Zc. 1:9 'What are these, my lord?'<sup>17</sup> But the usage is not exactly parallel. A safer conclusion would be that 'What is it?' is an imprecise question which can have several shades of meaning in Hebrew as in English. Motyer, following M. Buber, considers the use of *mî* and *mah* in questions of this type.<sup>18</sup> He concludes that, in general, *mah* is used where the emphasis is

<sup>12</sup> cf Mowinckel, 'The Two Sources of the Predeuteronomic Primeval History (JE)' in *Genesis 1-11*, Oslo, 1937, p. 55. 'The whole conversation presupposes that the Israelites know this name already'. Quoted in O. T. M. S. p. 53 f. a little more fully. The original book is again not available to me.

<sup>13</sup> Segal, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

<sup>14</sup> Gn 4:26, 12:8 etc. Segal, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

<sup>15</sup> Motyer, *op. cit.*, explicitly claims that there is one true name and that the El titles are descriptive. His exposition on pp. 24-30 goes some way towards justifying this.

<sup>16</sup> Cassuto, *Gn Vol. I*, pp. 246-8, translates *az yuhal* 'then men began again' and says this was due to the birth of Enosh. Since Enosh is also a term used for man this idea of a new beginning after the death of Abel has its attractions. Unfortunately Cassuto does not give adequate justification for his translation or rather interpretation. It is interesting that he gives a different explanation of 'call upon the name of' from Segal's. The confidence with which scholars put forward contradictory views is a constant problem.

<sup>17</sup> *op. cit.*, p. 5. He also quotes Zc. 5:6 which is particularly doubtful since the answer to 'What is it?' is given as 'This is the ephah that goes forth'. The fact that it 'goes forth' has already been mentioned in v. 5.

<sup>18</sup> *op. cit.*, pp. 17-21. He refers to Buber, *Moses*, 1946, yet another book to which I have no access.

on character or significance, while *m* is used where simply a name or list (etc) is required. He admits that this cannot be established from Hebrew usage alone. Nevertheless this interpretation fits extraordinarily well with the actual answer in the text of Ex. 3:13-15.

It seems that the final author or editor wished to make the connection between 'ehyeh 'asher 'ehyeh and Yahweh quite clear and that this is achieved by the transitional name 'ehyeh.<sup>19</sup> But there seems to be no good reason why this could not have been done in the first version of the story. In other words it is by no means impossible that (1) Yahweh communicated to Moses the name given in 14a, and caused him to see its connection with the name Yahweh; or (2) when the story was first conceived its author wrote or told it as it is now.<sup>20</sup>

A passage which has an important bearing on Ex. 3:13-15 is Ex. 33:12-23, especially vv. 12:17, 'I know you by name (*b<sup>e</sup>shēm*)' and v. 19, 'I will proclaim before you my name "Yahweh", and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy'. It is clear, as de Vaux points out, that the 'same stylistic device is used' and 'it seems parallel to Ex 3:14'.<sup>21</sup> It is also clear that in Ex 33, 'I know you by name' implies some sort of intimate relationship, not knowledge of what name Moses had been given by Pharaoh's daughter. It is in response to Moses' request for Yahweh to show him his *derek* (mode of being?)<sup>21</sup> that the answer is given 'I will proclaim my name . . .' In short the figure of 'knowing a name' signifies 'knowing the person' in a more than superficial way. Also of importance is Isa. 63:20-64:1 'Oh that thou would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains might quake at thy presence—as when fire kindles freshwood, and the fire causes water to boil—to make thy name known (*hiph* of *yāda'*) and that the nations might tremble at thy presence'. Here again knowing the name includes knowing the significance of that name.

Finally, if we accept the existence of E, the passages which are most confidently ascribed to him *tend* to prefer 'elohim' to the name 'Yahweh'.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Cassuto, *Exodus*, pp. 37-39 explains verse 14 differently: "'And he said . . . and he said . . .'" is a common construction in which first the words spoken are quoted and then the meaning is elucidated'. His treatment here is unsatisfactory but he refers to *La Questione* pp 82-92. He holds the view that Moses and the people of Israel had forgotten the name 'Yahweh' (and 'ehyeh also?) since the time of the revelation to the patriarchs. Since he claims that everything with a name was thought to have existence, presumably, he believes that it would have been enough for Moses simply to give the name and its interpretation for the elders to recognize their authenticity (p. 36 f). This view needs firm justification if it is to be accepted.

<sup>20</sup> That v. 14 is early is shown by Ho. 12:10, 13:4. Cf. R. de Vaux, 'The Revelation of the Divine Name', in *Proclamation and Presence*, ed. J. I. Durham and J. R. Porter, London, 1970, p. 71.

<sup>21</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 73.

<sup>22</sup> For this suggestion, which I have not yet been able to investigate fully I am indebted to my colleague Dr G. Wehmeier.

In concluding this section we may say that there are cogent reasons for doubting the normal exposition of Ex. 3 and that the writers quoted may point towards a more satisfactory solution of the problem.

Ex. 6:6-12 (P)

This follows on from Ex 2:25, 'And God saw the people of Israel and God knew (*their condition*)'.<sup>23</sup> 6:2 continues: 'And God said to Moses, I am Yahweh, and I appeared to Isaac and to Jacob as (*b<sup>e</sup>*) El Shaddai but by my name Yahweh I did not make myself known to them'.<sup>24</sup>

The first task is to decide how verse 3 is to be construed. There appear to be three grammatical possibilities:

(1) The *beth* in *bish<sup>e</sup>mī* is *beth essentiae* signifying 'in the manner of, in the capacity of'.<sup>25</sup> The parallelism may imply that 'Yahweh' is also governed by *beth essentiae*.<sup>26</sup>

(2) The *sh<sup>e</sup>mī* is *casus pendens*: 'as to my name Yahweh, I did not make myself known'.<sup>27</sup>

(3) The second part is a peculiar Hebrew construction where there are two subjects to one verb. One is a person and one is a thing, with a suffix in the same person. The latter gives the 'instrument, organ or member by which the action in question is performed, . . . as a nearer definition of the manner of action'.<sup>28</sup> This gives the familiar rendering 'by my name'.

The normal interpretation is that Yahweh did in fact have dealings with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob but they knew only the name El Shaddai and not Yahweh. Cassuto claims that if this had been the meaning the text would have said 'my name Yahweh I did not make known' or 'was not known'.<sup>29</sup> This type of argument cannot be conclusive since not all writers express themselves in the clearest,

<sup>23</sup> In the second part of the verse LXX has *kai egnosthe autois* which might represent *wayyiwwada' 'alêhem* instead of *MT's wayyeda' 'elôhîm*. In other words the original meaning might have been 'and he revealed himself to them', 'and he made himself known to them'. This usage is attested in e.g. Ez 20:5, 38:23, Ruth 3:3. Compare the *niphal wa'era'* in Ex 6:3.

<sup>24</sup> *wa'era' 'el-'abraham 'el-yiṣṣaq we'el-ya'aqob be'el-shadday ūshemī yhw lo' nōda'tī lahem*.

The versions seem to have found difficulty with this verse and interpreted it as 'and my name Yahweh I did not make known to them'. The MT should be retained as *lectio difficilior*. Cassuto, *Exodus*, p. 78, notes that the same form occurs in Ez 20:9f which he believes is 'undoubtedly dependent on our paragraph'.

<sup>25</sup> GK 119i, BDB pp. 88f, 908.

<sup>26</sup> Motyer, *op. cit.*, p. 14. He quotes Isa. 48:9 and other verses. The suggestion seems possible.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

<sup>28</sup> GK 144l. Ps 83:19 is quoted as an example. Cassuto, *op. cit.*, calls *shemī* an 'accusative of nearer definition'. This differs in theory from GK (cf 117s) but the meaning is the same.

<sup>29</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 78.

most accurate and least ambiguous way! But it is right to draw attention to the slightly unusual construction of the text. He notes four other phenomena which disprove the above interpretation:

- (a) It was the established custom of Eastern monarchs to begin their proclamations with the formula 'I am so and so' even though their name was well known to everyone.
- (b) Verse 2 says 'I am Yahweh' and not 'my name is Yahweh' which would have been written if the above interpretation had been intended.
- (c) The phrase 'I am Yahweh' occurs very frequently in the Bible and nowhere else can it possibly have the meaning that 'the name of the God of Israel is Yahweh'.
- (d) The formula occurs also in vv. 6, 7, 8 'and these instances cannot possibly be regarded as a revelation of the Tetragrammaton'.<sup>30</sup>

It cannot be doubted that the usual purpose of the phrase is not to reveal the name Yahweh but rather to bring to the minds of the hearers all they know concerning Yahweh's character and deeds. But it would be possible for someone to hear this phrase without any previous knowledge of Yahweh. In this case he would remember the name and begin to form a circle of associated images. That is simply to say the same phrase may have different meaning for different people or on different occasions. Consequently Cassuto's arguments cannot be accepted as they stand.

Let us for a moment suppose that this *was* the first occasion that the phrase 'I am Yahweh' was used. The meaning of the passage would be something like this: 'You know about the patriarchs and their dealings with a divine Reality they know as El Shaddai. I am El Shaddai but I am also Yahweh. This latter name has greater significance which has not been manifested up to now. In a short time you will begin to see the significance'. It is clear therefore that the main purpose of the passage is not to say that 'this is the first time anyone used the name Yahweh' but to draw attention to the significance of the name. This does not seem to be so revolutionary for the documentary theory as many dissenters have thought.

It should be noted that there are a number of parallels between Gn. 17 and this passage:

- (a) El Shaddai, 17:1 and 6:3;
- (b) 'Establish my covenant' (*hiphil* of *qum*) 17:7, 19:21 and 6:4;
- (c) I will be their (your) God, 17:8 and 6:7.

I do not see how it can be denied that Gn. 17 is as definitely P-type material' as anything could be and Ex. 6 is a reference back to this chapter. It is possible then that P<sup>31</sup> does not normally use 'Yahweh' before Ex. 6 because he believes He has not acted according

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 76f, cf. Segal, pp. 6-8.

<sup>31</sup> The use of the symbol P does not imply acceptance of the documentary theory as such. Here it signifies the author of these two passages and others which appear to come from the same hand.



to the character expressed by this name. This would explain its non-use in narrative passages and would allow for exceptions for the sake of variety.

It seems therefore that the study, undertaken by Cassuto, Segal and others, of the actual usage of the various divine names is of greater value than most scholars seem to have thought.<sup>32</sup> It is a pity that their studies do not, for example, give attention to the usage in Gn. 12 and 20, nor in Gn. 16 and 21. Segal makes the interesting suggestion that 'elohim' was at one time predominant in popular usage (cf Jg. 9). But this also implies that the divine names might be a distinguishing mark of different layers of tradition. On the other hand the state of affairs is likely to be more complex than the traditional documentary theory supposes.

## Conclusions

In the course of this enquiry it has been seen that the usual critical exegesis of Ex 3 and 6 is not wholly satisfactory and that this is not the only view possible. To the present writer it seems that we should accept the text of Ex 3:13-15 as it stands as coming from one author. Further, it seems that this author meant to portray Moses as asking for some knowledge concerning the significance of the name Yahweh. In neither Ex 3 nor 6 is the main point to impart the bare knowledge of a name. In the latter passage, whichever grammatical explanation is accepted for v. 3, the sense seems to be fairly conveyed by the translation 'in the character expressed by my name Yahweh I was not known to them'.

As far as the documentary hypothesis is concerned this conclusion for ch. 6 does not have serious consequences; but I believe that ch. 3 does not provide justification for using 'Yahweh' and 'elohim' to separate the narrative of Gn. 1 to Ex. 3 into J and E. It seems that in any case we should interpret the text without allowing our view of Ex. 6 to prejudice the result.

<sup>32</sup> See Segal, pp. 11-14; Cassuto, *Documentary Hypothesis*, pp. 27-40.