

Followers of the Way

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Exodus 3:1-15

This is the third in our short series of talks on foundations. Last time, we looked at how the word Elohim is used in the first sentence of the Bible to describe the Creator God. And we looked at how the first and last letters of the Hebrew alphabet – Aleph and Tav – form the central word of that sentence, pointing to Jesus and becoming His watermark running through the whole of the Old Testament. Today we'll be exploring the name God used for Himself when He first spoke to Moses on Mount Horeb.

The Bible shows how, as people came to experience various aspects of God over time, they gave names – sometimes to Him, sometimes to places where they'd encountered Him – to reflect what they'd experienced. So, we get Jehovah Jireh (God the Provider), Jehovah Rapha (God the Healer) and many more. Poor Hagar struggled so much to describe the God who met with her by the well at Beersheba (Genesis 16:13) that she simply called Him, Lahai Roi (the One who sees me).

There are things we can tell about God from how He acts and what He says. There are also things we can discern about Him from Creation. Paul says, "For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities – his eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse." (Romans 1:20). Beyond these things that we can work out for ourselves, we're reliant on God's deeper revelation of Himself. The ultimate revelation of Himself is, of course, in Christ Jesus. But in Old Testament terms God revealed Himself most fully to Moses. The second of these great revelations was when God passed in front of Moses proclaiming some of His qualities – His compassion, grace, patience, forbearance, mercy and justice. We read about this in Exodus 34:6.

God's first great revelation of Himself to Moses came with the disclosure of His personal name when the former prince of Egypt encountered Him in the burning bush. Incidentally, this makes a powerful contrast with the gods of ancient Egypt. The chief of those gods, Amun, refused to reveal his true name. He was known as the One who conceals himself. Ancient Egyptian religion thought knowing someone's name gave you power over them. In their Book of the Dead, they were told to declare the names of the demons they'd meet in the afterlife, as a way of navigating safely past them. The one true God, of course, has nothing to fear from anyone and isn't afraid to reveal Himself. Which brings us to God's revelation of Himself on Mount Horeb. See what Moses had to do before this revelation could take place. He had to:

- Note an unusual phenomenon (fire which blazed but didn't consume)
- Investigate ("I will go over and see this strange sight, why the bush does not burn.")

- Answer when God called. ('Moses! Moses!' 'Here I am.')
- Respond obediently to instructions ("Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground.")

How often we fail to do any of these things! Because Moses did, it was then possible for him to have the interchange with God that followed. ("Come, let us reason together." Isaiah 1:18). And so it is that God reveals His name.

Before looking at the name in detail, some background. We're probably all familiar with seeing the word LORD written entirely in capitals in the Old Testament. This reflects the fact that Jews wanted to make sure they didn't inadvertently take God's name in vain. So, they substituted Adonai (LORD) wherever the name revealed to Moses appeared. In time, they forgot how to pronounce this name and since classical Hebrew is written without vowels, we can't be sure what it sounded like. Previous generations rendered it as Jehovah. Nowadays the preferred rendition is Yahweh.

Exodus 3:14 isn't the first time the name LORD appears in the Bible. It's there as early as Genesis 2:4, which talks about how "the LORD made the earth and the heavens." And Genesis 4:26 tells us that after the birth of Seth's son Enosh, "at that time men began to call on the name of the LORD." But it seems that LORD was simply the name Moses chose when writing his narrative, rather than its being a reflection of the fact that God's personal name was known at this point. Why say that? Because Genesis 17:1 shows that God described Himself to Abram as God Almighty [El Shaddai, also capable of being rendered as God the mountain one] rather than as LORD.

Now, let's get into the detail of the name itself: I AM what I am – which could also be rendered as, I WILL BE what I will be. (God is outside time and experiences past, present and future in a way quite different from us: a day to the Lord is as a thousand years and a thousand years as a day.)

It comprises 4 letters in Hebrew, read right to left in the sequence Yod Heh Vav Heh.

The Tetragrammaton Exodus 3:14



Yod: the only letter of the Hebrew alphabet that doesn't reach down to the writing line = God in heaven. Its topmost point = the manifestation of something out of nothing, the tail pointing down = the initial impetus of creative will directed towards the earth – the first "Let there be" of Creation.

In Hebrew grammar, Yod is associated with the masculine, Heh with the feminine. So, the divine name contains within itself elements that we would call male and female.

Heh symbolises what enables the initial creative impulse of Yod to be directed and maintained – taking in, directing and sustaining this impulse so as to enable what was contemplated to come into being. Nature is an imperfect parallel, as by definition the creature cannot fully know the Creator. But nevertheless, it gives a framework to see in part. In nature, the female gives shape, definition and form to what was initiated by the male through the implanting of seed and subsequent development of the egg.

The third letter (Vav) is an extension of Yod down to the writing line. It shows a further working out of the creative force of Yod and development of the divine will to action. At the same time, it stands for linkage. As we saw previously, it can be translated as “And”, but can also mean anything that connects, like a hook or nail. It conveys the means by which the initial expression of divine nature which appears in Yod and Heh is brought to its fullest development and made manifest.

For this to happen, there has to be a birthing, as what was conceived in Yod and Heh is brought forth into the world. That birthing process is represented by the final letter of the name – Heh (feminine, since it’s the female who carries the unborn through its period of gestation and delivers it at the end of the term.) This last Heh stands for the shekinah glory of God, the means by which the divine is conveyed into and made present in Creation.

It’s sometimes said the Old Testament doesn’t refer to the Trinity, but the name revealed to Moses points to a three-in-one God – Yod, Heh and Heh held together in perfect love and eternal fellowship by Vav. And as we reflect on the features of this divine name, we can see added significance in other parts of Scripture. For example:

1. A combination of male and female elements gives an added twist to occasions when God speaks maternally – “As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you” (Isaiah 66:13) or “Oh Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather you as a hen gathers her chicks, but you were not willing” (Matthew 23:37).
2. Man and woman in marriage are intended to invite the Holy Spirit to join them so they become a representation of God himself. (Yod, Heh, Heh).
3. To become fully human and all God intended him to be, Abram needed the addition of the Holy Spirit (Heh) and of the feminine so that he became Abraham.
4. When giving the Law on Sinai, God introduced the Ten Commandments by saying, ‘I am the LORD your God who brought you up out of Egypt’ (Exodus 20:1), showing the His law proceeds from His very essence.
5. When soldiers come to arrest Jesus and he says, “I am he”, we’re told that when he said this, “they drew back and fell to the ground”. (John 18:5).
6. The 7 “I am” statements in John’s Gospel – the Bread of Life; the Light of the World; the Gate for the Sheep; the Good Shepherd; the Resurrection and the Life; the Way, the Truth and the Life; the True Vine.

There’s power in God’s name, and it’s the ultimate authority. We bear this name. Its stamp is on us. We have authority greater than we know. In these days when darkness is upon the earth and deep darkness upon the peoples (Isaiah 60:2), it’s time for us to

take this authority: to arise and shine so that the Kingdom of God is made manifest through us. Let today be the day.

