

Followers of the Way

YAHWEH – God’s Covenant Name

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Exodus 3:1-15

We know all Scripture is God-breathed, and we know it is all useful – from the first verse of Genesis to the final verse of Revelation. Having said that, however, there are certain passages of Holy Scripture that are key to our understanding of God’s revelation of Himself to us.

One such is Exodus 3:13-15 where God reveals His name to Moses. We know the story – the Israelites were in Egypt for 400 years under bondage, they cried out to God who heard their prayer and sent a deliverer in Moses; born a Hebrew but brought up by Pharaoh’s daughter. At the age of 40 he fled Egypt after killing an Egyptian for ill -treating one of his people, and became a shepherd in Midian for another 40 years.

It was at the age of 80, while tending his father-in-law’s sheep on Mt Horeb, that he witnessed the sight of a burning bush. This was a regular occurrence in the heat of the desert, yet this bush, although ablaze, was not consumed. It was as he approached to see this strange sight that God spoke to him (vv.4&5).

Moses was reluctant to return to Egypt and made many excuses, the first was -

Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, “The God of your fathers has sent me to you,” and they ask me, “What is his name?” Then what shall I tell them? (v.13)

This is when God reveals His divine name –

God said to Moses, ‘I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: “I AM has sent me to you.”’

God also said to Moses, ‘Say to the Israelites, “The LORD, the God of your fathers – the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob – has sent me to you.” (vv.14-15)

French philosopher Descartes wrote, ‘I think, therefore I am,’ but only God can say, ‘I AM, therefore I AM,’ the self-existent one. Everyone and everything else owes their existence to God the Creator; God alone exists in and of Himself. I AM WHO I AM. Like an eternal flame - ever burning but never consuming.

Some people get confused and think the divine name YAHWEH is equivalent to ‘I AM WHO I AM’. I even read this mistake in a book by a well known Bible teacher where he said, ‘YHWH (translated into English as “I AM WHO I AM”)! Not so.

They are related but not the same. The root of both terms is the verb ‘to be’: v.14 uses the first person singular and v.15 uses the third person singular.

YAHWEH, God’s Covenant Name.

The NIV Study Bible puts it like this – ‘When God speaks of himself, He says, “I AM”, when we speak of him we say, “He is”.’¹

The technical term for God’s covenant name is the tetragrammaton or four letters – yodh, heh, waw, heh – transliterated into English as Y.H.W.H. No-one knows for sure how the divine name should be pronounced because from an early stage in Jewish history it was thought too

¹ NIV Study Bible, p.91

sacred to be spoken aloud, possibly as a response to the third commandment - 'You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name.' (Exodus 20:7)

When reading from the Torah, the four consonants of the divine name would be substituted with Adonay, meaning Lord. This is why our English translation uses the word LORD, in capitals, to convey the divine name; and also why we pronounce it YaHWeH because of the vowel sounds of Adonay. The name Jehovah came via the Latin translation in late mediaeval times and became very popular. It is now almost universally accepted to be the wrong pronunciation, despite the beautiful hymn, 'Guide Me O Thou Great Jehovah!' In revealing His covenant name to Moses, God is not simply offering a means of identification, but of action. The verb translated as 'I AM' can also mean 'I will be'; so God promises Moses in v.12 - And God said, 'I will be with you.' And as a result of God's presence, He said, 'this will be the sign to you that it is I who have sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you will worship God on this mountain' - that is Horeb or Sinai.

That's exactly what happened, the LORD (YAHWEH) was with Moses in his confrontation with Pharaoh, and through the ten plagues released them from bondage in Egypt, through the Red Sea and to Mt Sinai where He made His covenant with them. There were, of course, previous covenants - with Adam, Noah, Abraham - but this covenant on Sinai was the one that bound them into a nation.

How did He address the people as He spoke the terms of the covenant in Exodus 20? 'I am the LORD your God...' (v.2) In hearing that we might think God is using both forms of His name - I AM and the LORD (YAHWEH), but this is an example of something being lost in translation! The Hebrew literally reads 'I, YAHWEH your God' and He uses that divine name in all the Ten Commandments.

So, YAHWEH is God's covenant name; the name by which He wants to be known and remembered, v.15:

'Say to the Israelites, "The LORD, the God of your fathers - the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob - has sent me to you." This is my name for ever, the name by which I am to be remembered from generation to generation.'

God's divine name is not just a way of identifying Him, but summed up everything He is: His person, character, authority, power, reputation. To live under His name is to live under His covenant.

In expanding the terms of the covenant in Leviticus 19 God said: 'Each of you must respect your mother and father, and you must observe my Sabbaths.' Why? Because 'I am YAHWEH your God.' 'Do not turn to idols or make metal gods for yourselves.' Why? Because 'I am YAHWEH your God' (Lev 19:3-4). Summed up succinctly with the phrase 'Be holy because I, YAHWEH your God, am holy.' (Lev 19:2)

The whole covenant was summed up in God's divine name as found in the Shema, the Israelite creed:

"Hear, O Israel: the LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength" (Deut 6:4-5).

In fact Jesus said the whole of the Law and the Prophets were encapsulated in this greatest of commandments, along with "Love your neighbour as yourself" (Mt 22:37-40). A parchment containing the Shema and verses from Deut 11 are placed into a Mezuzah, a receptacle attached to the doorpost, so the whole house is under the covenant.

Also God gave the priests the covenant blessing to say, known to us as the Aaronic Blessing, Numbers 6:22ff:

"The LORD said to Moses, "Tell Aaron and his sons, "This is how you are to bless the Israelites. Say to them:

The LORD bless you
 and keep you;
 the LORD make his face shine on you
 and be gracious to you;
 the LORD turn his face towards you
 and give you peace.”

And the purpose? v.27 ‘So they will put my name on the Israelites, and I will bless them.’ Living under the covenant name of God brings blessing. But we of course are not under the Old Covenant, we are under the New Covenant of grace, through Christ’s blood.

So what relevance does God’s covenant name hold for us as Christians? When we think of God as YAHWEH, who are we focusing on? I suspect most people are thinking of God the Father. But is this true or is there more to God’s covenant name than that? We are all aware of God’s covenant name, YAHWEH, which, as I said, following Jewish practice is conveyed in our English Bibles as LORD, all capitals. This is also how the Greek translation of the Old Testament, Septuagint, wrote the divine name – κυριος, Lord. This practice continued in the New Testament writings.

For example, in Isaiah 40:3 the prophet points to a future restoration of the Israelites following the judgement of Exile, when he says,

“A voice of one calling
 In the wilderness: ‘prepare
 the way for the LORD;
 make straight in the desert
 a highway for our God.”

This refers to ‘YAHWEH Himself returning to Israel as king.’² Matthew, the most Jewish of the Gospels, who cites the OT more than the others, quotes the Isaiah passage verbatim in Greek and says it refers to John the Baptist. Who was the Baptist preparing the way for? Jesus. Who is Jesus? Κυριος, the LORD, YAHWEH!

The name Jesus means ‘YAHWEH saves.’ How does He save? Through the death and resurrection of Jesus, the One who bears the name that is above every other name. ‘At the name of Jesus every knee shall bow, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord (YAHWEH) to the glory of God the Father. (Phil 2:10-11)

If there’s still any doubt we only have to turn to John’s Gospel. There we are presented with seven ‘I am’ sayings of Jesus – ‘I am the bread of life,’ ‘I am the light of the world,’ ‘I am the good shepherd’ etc. It is generally agreed that these sayings point to the divinity of Jesus.

But there is one other ‘I am’ saying in John 8:58, that is perhaps more significant than all the others. Jesus is arguing with the Jews about their father Abraham whom He claims to have seen. When they dismiss this as nonsense He says, ‘before Abraham was born, I am!’ At this they picked up stones to stone Him, because this mere man in their eyes was claiming to be God, the same God who appeared to Moses in the burning bush and declared ‘I AM WHO I AM.’ So the name YAHWEH does not refer to the Father alone, but sums up the totality of who God is: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

It’s similar to the word Elohim, meaning a single God but in plural form, hinting at the Trinity from the very first verse of Genesis.

God’s covenant name embraces all believers, whether fulfilled Jews or ingrafted Gentiles. We all come under that name, expressed in Jesus, YAHWEH saves, who through His shed blood on the cross and resurrection from the tomb, kept the covenant on our behalf, was the reality of the shadows the Old Covenant pointed to, and became the Saviour of the world.

² Beale & Carson, Commentary on the NT use of the OT, p.12