

The Revelation of the Divine Name

Distilled from Chapter 2 of 'Who Is God?' by Richard Bauckham

When you're reading your Bible, have you ever wondered why the word 'Lord' is sometimes spelled with an upper case (capital) 'L', followed by 'ORD', in slightly smaller upper case letters. In today's reading you'll see it in verses 2 and 4.

The Hebrew name for God is represented by four letters, *yod, he, waw* and *he*, which in English becomes YHWH.

Because ancient Hebrew didn't use vowels (it didn't use spaces either, and no separate symbols for numbers!) it is impossible to know for certain how the name was originally pronounced, and in English we often use 'Jehovah' or 'Yahweh'.

From about 600BC onward, this word stopped being used, replaced by the Hebrew word for 'my Lord', *adonai*.

Jesus and his followers also used a substitute, the Greek word for Lord, *kyrios*.

English translations of the Bible have generally continued this practice, with 'the Name' being represented by 'the LORD'.

Moses and the Burning Bush

The first use of the Divine Name is found in chapter 3 of the book of Exodus. Moses has fled to Midian after killing an Egyptian overseer who was beating a Hebrew slave.

Now Moses was tending the flock of Jethro his father-in-law, the priest of Midian, and he led the flock to the far side of the wilderness and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. There the angel of the LORD appeared to him in flames of fire from within a bush. Moses saw that though the bush was on fire it did not burn up. So Moses thought, "I will go over and see this strange sight – why the bush does not burn up."

When the LORD saw that he had gone over to look, God called to him from within the bush, “Moses! Moses!”

And Moses said, “Here I am.”

“Do not come any closer,” God said. “Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground.” Then he said, “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob.” At this, Moses hid his face, because he was afraid to look at God.

Exodus 3:1-6

In the early history of the Old Testament, the ‘angel of the LORD’ is frequently used to describe the actual presence and voice of God, which is why we see the writer of this passage struggling to make sense of what he is describing, moving from describing God using the ‘new’ name YHWH which is translated as ‘Lord’ to the more common ‘Elohim’ which is translated as ‘God’.

Moses is instructed not to get too close to the burning bush, and to remove his footwear (a widely-accepted custom in Middle Eastern countries – and in my house! – symbolising respect for the place/person you are visiting), God is making it clear that this is a very special event, the place on which Moses is standing is ‘holy’ ground.

Holy (Hebrew: *quodesh*) has a rich range of meanings, including ‘set-apart’, ‘sacred’, ‘transcendent’ and ‘heavy’, and this is the first time in the Bible that the word occurs.

God then talks with Moses, telling him that he is aware of the misery of his people in Egypt, and that he has heard their prayers. More than that, he intends to free them, and give them the land of Canaan, and Moses will be the one who leads them out.

Moses is less than pleased about this. He is a wanted man in Egypt, and his last contact with the Hebrew people gave him no reason to think that he would receive a warm reception from them.

And so, not for the last time, Moses argues with God. God promises him that he will be with him, and that Moses will be successful. Moses is still not convinced.

Moses' next request is, to 21st century westerners, a strange one...

Moses said to God, "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?"

Exodus 3:13

In the time of Moses, all the gods had names. Egypt had plenty of them, including Ra, Osiris, Isis and Set. To make requests to them, you needed to know who to ask, and Moses seems to think that the Israelites will want something more specific than 'the God of your ancestors'.

Rather than telling him to shut up and get on with it, God replies, in three carefully structured stages.

The first answer seems more like a refusal to provide a name...

God said to Moses, "I am who I am".

Exodus 3:14a

The exact meaning of the Hebrew is debated by scholars. It could be present tense (I am who I am) or future (I will be who I will be). However, it is clear that this is God saying that he cannot be tied down to a mere 'name', he is utterly free to be whatever he chooses to be. He cannot be limited or controlled by anything but himself.

God is completely self-sufficient. Unlike the Egyptians, who believed that knowing the names of their gods gave them some control over them, like summoning genies from a bottle, the God of the Israelites decides when, where and how he will do things.

The second stage of the answer goes...

This is what you are to say to the Israelites: 'I am has sent me to you.'

Exodus 3:14b

Here he shortens ‘I am who I am’ (*ehyeh aser ehyeh* in Hebrew) to ‘I am’ (*ehyeh*). The phrase/word doesn’t make grammatical sense, but God is saying ‘OK, I’ll give you a name, but knowing my name does not give you power over me, it is a name that signifies that I am the one in control’.

(By the way, some of you may be thinking ‘I remember Jesus used that phrase’, and you’re correct, in fact he uses it 8 times in John’s Gospel, and it is one of the clearest claims that Jesus makes to being God, and the one of the reasons the religious authorities became increasingly hostile to him).

Which brings us to the third stage of the answer...

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.’”

Exodus 3:15a

Here God gives himself another title, and links it to the one he used at the beginning of the story. The LORD is the four letters we talked about earlier, YHWH, which in Hebrew looks (it has three of the same letters) similar to the ‘I am’ he has just used (*ehyeh*). God enjoys a pun.

As he has done before, and will go on to do again and again, God responds to his people’s requests while making it clear that he can never be manipulated. He wants a relationship with his people, and gives them a name that they can use to identify him by – a name that is used nearly 7000 times in the Hebrew Bible.

What did Jesus call God?

By the time Jesus was born, most Jews believed that the Divine Name should not be used except in the temple on the day of atonement when the high priest blessed the crowd, probably to avoid God’s name being used in ways that were blasphemous.

And so *adonai* (Hebrew) or *kyrios* (Greek) were used as substitutes. Jews knew what these words represented, they just didn't say or write it. The New Testament usually uses *kyrios* for the Divine Name.

The gospel writers portray Jesus using a range of words for God, (complicated by the fact they eventually realise that Jesus is God!). One of the most significant is that when Jesus prays, he nearly always addressed God as 'Father'.

Although the idea that we are God's children is commonly used in the Old Testament, to address God as 'father' was very unusual, and demonstrates the close relationship that Jesus has with God.

And when Jesus taught his disciples how to pray, he tells them to pray to their 'Father' and 'Our Father in heaven'. Jesus made the Divine Name accessible to us, we can speak with God as a child talks with their parent.

While the gospels were written in Greek, they use the Aramaic word 'Abba' that Jesus would have spoken. Even the apostle Paul uses the word, in the books of Romans and Galatians, even though the people he was addressing had no knowledge of Aramaic.

I said that Jesus nearly always addressed God as Father. The only time when he didn't was as he hung nailed to a cross...

And at three in the afternoon Jesus cried out in a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?" (which means "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?").

Mark 15:34

Here Jesus is quoting from Psalm 22, where the Psalmist is expressing his despair at being abandoned by God. I don't think I have to explain how significant that is.

Jesus the Lord

The writers of the New Testament regularly use the word 'Lord' (*kyrios*) when referring to Jesus.

Is this significant? *Kyrios* has a wide range of meanings. It was most commonly used when referring to or addressing, a superior, as we would use the word 'Sir'.

But, as we have already discovered, it was also used as a substitute for the Divine Name.

In his letter to the Philippians, Paul quotes an early Christian hymn. The final section reads...

*Therefore God exalted him to the highest place
and gave him the name that is above every name,
that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.*

Philippians 2:9-11

This is based on a section of Isaiah 45, where it is talking about YHWH, the one and only God to whom every knee shall bow. This language is being applied to Jesus. And the Divine Name is being applied to him.

Paul is saying that the same person that Jesus told his disciples to pray to, the hope of the Old Testament prophets, is the One that Jesus reveals, the One who Jesus shares the Divine Name with!

For Christians, the time that the Old Testament prophets called the 'Day of the Lord (YHWH)' becomes the 'Day of our Lord Jesus Christ'.

Conclusion

When God revealed his name to Moses, it was his way of saying that he wanted to be accessible and knowable to Israel as a people. As God had made clear to Moses' ancestor Abraham, this was part of his plan to make himself known to every human being.

And Jesus was the ultimate revelation of this plan. The 'I am' became human and lived among us, Jew and non-Jew. The one who God was

pleased to give the Divine Name, the one who lived and died to make sure that we could call the creator and sustainer of the universe, Father.

Hallelujah!