

A NEW OCCURRENCE OF THE DIVINE NAME "I AM"

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In the ancient Near East, names bore a significance that they rarely bear today. Most mothers who give their baby girls the name "Deborah" (or the shortened form, "Debra") probably do so because they like the sound of the name, especially its diminutive or caritative form, "Debbie." But when the Palestinian mother in ancient times named her daughter *Deborah* she did so knowing that the word means "Honeybee." Similarly, the modern father may name his newborn son "John" because he has a rich relative by that name, but in ancient times the same name would be bestowed on a boy because it means "The Lord Is Gracious." Knowing that fact adds just the right touch to the story in the first chapter of Luke concerning the aged couple, Zechariah and Elizabeth, whose first-born son the angel named *Y(eh)ohanan*, "The Lord Is Gracious."

So it is that in ancient times a person's name reflected his character, his personality, or his history. A particularly clear example of that concept is found in Abigail's statement to David in 1 Samuel 25:25: "Let not my lord regard this ill-natured fellow, Nabal; for as his name is, so is he; Nabal is his name, and folly is with him." As soon as one learns that the Hebrew word *nabal* means "fool," the sarcasm of Abigail becomes crystal clear.

And what was true of human names in ancient Palestine was true of divine names as well. Our God is called by many names in Scripture, and each of those names is full of meaning. The two most frequent and most important Old Testament names of the one true God are Elohim and Yahweh. "Elohim," a plural form, is translated simply as "God" in most English versions when the God of Israel is meant. "Yahweh" is rendered as "LORD," spelled entirely with capital letters, in most English versions.

These two names, Yahweh and Elohim, constitute one set of criteria used by scholars in their attempt to get back to the original sources that underlie certain of the canonical books of the Old Testament. Ever since the days of H. B. Witter and J. Astruc, it has been believed by many that the first four books of the Old Testament in particular demonstrate the existence of one or more written sources that preferred the name "God"

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and one or more written sources that preferred the name "LORD." That such preferences do exist in the books of Genesis through Numbers it is impossible to deny. What those preferences signify is a question of considerable debate, a question that in the minds of many has far-reaching consequences for a proper understanding of those books. It is a matter, however, to which we cannot give our attention here.

But it will be useful for us to point out that the same preferences for one divine name over another are evident when one reads the Book of Psalms carefully. The completed Psalter has for centuries been traditionally divided into five sections, as follows: 1-41, 42-72, 73-89, 90-106, 107-150. The first and fourth of these sections use the name "Yahweh" almost to the exclusion of the name "Elohim." On the other hand, the second section, Psalms 42-72, uses the name "Elohim" the vast majority of times, almost never using the name "Yahweh." Whether theological, historical, or editorial considerations, or a combination of these, are responsible for these statistics is unknown, but the phenomenon is there for any interested reader to observe.

Psalm 50 occurs within the second main section of the Psalter, the one that uses "Elohim" almost exclusively. It does not surprise us, then, that "Elohim" is found nine times in that Psalm while each of the other divine names used in it is found there only once. I would contend that, in addition to "Elohim," six other divine names, for a total of seven, are found in Psalm 50, an unusually large number indeed to occur in any single Psalm.

In fact, Psalm 50 may be characterized as a Psalm in praise of God's names. It begins and ends with one of the divine names. Indeed, it begins with three separate names of God with no words intervening: "El Elohim Yahweh," translated in the RSV as "The Mighty One, God the LORD." That particular sequence appears again in the Old Testament only in Joshua 22:22, and there also in a similarly solemn setting. "El," the generic word for "god" in Hebrew, as in *Samuel*, *Babel*, and *Bethel*, also means "might, power" and is therefore adequately translated as "The Mighty One" in Psalm 50:1. "Elohim" as "God" and "Yahweh" as "LORD" reflect the ordinary renderings for those words, as we indicated earlier.

The fourth name of God that occurs in this Psalm is "Judge" (v. 8), reminiscent of the name used by Abraham in his rhetorical question in Genesis 18:25: "Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?" God is referred to fifthly in our Psalm as "the Most High" (v. 14), a name used of Him by Melchizedek as well as by Abram in Genesis 14:19-22. A sixth name applied to God in Psalm 50 is the Hebrew word "Eloah" (v. 22), also conventionally translated as "God" and found most frequently in the Book of Job.

The seventh of the names of God occurring in Psalm 50 is almost

never recognized as such. It is found in verse 21 in the midst of a statement by God to the wicked that begins back in verse 16. The verse in question reads in the RSV: "These things you have done and I have been silent; you thought that I was one like yourself. But now I rebuke you, and lay the charge before you." Other modern English translations render the verse in much the same way. But to do so requires an emendation, however slight, in the Hebrew text. Such emendation is not necessary in this case, since the verse can be understood as it stands. All that is required is to read the words translated "I was" by the RSV in an equally acceptable way, "I am," and to understand the "I am" as a divine name. The verse then reads in part: "These things you have done and I have been silent; you thought I AM was like you!"

That "I AM" is a legitimate divine name is well known from the account of the call of Moses in Exodus 3. Airing his doubts that the people of Israel would pay any attention to him when he came to them with a reputed message from the heavenly court, "Moses said to God, 'If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, "The God of your fathers has sent me to you," and they ask me, "What is his name?" what shall I say to them?"' (Ex. 3:13). In response, "God said to Moses, 'I AM WHO I AM.' And he said, 'Say this to the people of Israel, "I AM has sent me to you"'" (3:14). The word translated three times as "I AM" in that verse is the same word that I have translated as "I AM" in Psalm 50:21.¹ It will be useful for us to explore further the usage of this word in the Old Testament.

The writer of the Exodus 3 passage related the Hebrew divine name, "Ehyeh," meaning "I AM," to the divine name "Yahweh." He states in Exodus 3:15 that "God also said to Moses, 'Say this to the people of Israel, "The LORD . . . has sent me to you": this is my name for ever, and thus I am to be remembered throughout all generations.'" In this passage the divine name "I AM" and the divine name "LORD" are equated: "I AM has sent me to you" (3:14), "The LORD . . . has sent me to you" (3:15). Although the word "Yahweh" is generally translated "LORD" in the English versions, the original root of the word seems to bear a close relationship to the divine name "I AM." Much has been written in recent years about the grammatical form,² about the pronunciation,³ about the

1. It is to the credit of A. F. Kirkpatrick, *The Book of Psalms, Books II and III (Psalms XLII-LXXXIX)* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1895), p. 283, that the author recognized the occurrence of the divine name in this verse, although he failed to develop its full implications there. Marvin W. Anderson has also called my attention to what appears to be a similar recognition by Francisco Stancaro, an anti-Trinitarian polemicist and Hebraist in sixteenth-century Poland, in an extremely rare work entitled *Disputatio de Trinitate* (June 20, 1551), sig. A3^r mg. For the most part, more recent commentators have remained unaware of both the occurrence and the implications; cf., e.g., M. Dahood, *Psalms I (1-50)* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1965), p. 310.
2. Cf., e.g., H. Huffmon, *Amorite Personal Names in the Mari Texts* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1965), pp. 72 f.
3. Cf., e.g., G. W. Buchanan, *The Consequences of the Covenant* (Leiden: Brill, 1970), pp. 316 f.

meaning,⁴ about the theological significance⁵ of the word "Yahweh," all of which is intensely interesting in its own right. The Biblical author would probably have translated "Yahweh" as "HE IS" since he clearly understood it as being related to "Ehyeh," "I AM." The original concept behind this strange phenomenon would then be that when God's people spoke of Him they would call Him "Yahweh," HE IS," whereas when God spoke of Himself He would use the name "Ehyeh," "I AM."

An observation or two about Hebrew grammar would appear to be in order at this point. In addition to being the divine name "I AM," the verb *ehyeh* can also have a human subject and express simply the verbal idea, "I am" (or, for that matter, "I will be," "I was," "I have been," and the like, depending on the context, since the Hebrew verbal system has no precise tense distinctions as such). Furthermore, there are three basic ways in which to say "I am" in Hebrew: (1) one can use *ehyeh* alone, corresponding roughly to the English word "am"; (2) one can use the independent personal pronoun, "I," alone; or (3) one can use the pronoun "I" plus the verb *ehyeh*, "am," thereby saying "I am" most emphatically.

Now a quick check of Mandelkern's concordance reveals that the verbal form *ehyeh* occurs 55 times in the Old Testament, 36 of those times with God as the subject.⁶ Before fully half of those 36 occurrences the independent pronoun "I" appears. Needless to say, it would be overstating the case to insist that every time God is the subject of the verb *ehyeh*, with or without the pronoun, we should understand *ehyeh* as another attestation of the divine name "Ehyeh." In many if not most of the cases, we should perhaps simply assume that the ordinary verbal idea, "am" or "will be" or the like, is intended. In fact, in addition to the three occurrences of the divine name "I AM" in Exodus 3:14 and the one occurrence in Psalm 50:21, there would seem to be only one clear attestation of the name elsewhere in the Old Testament. The first chapter of Hosea is concerned primarily with the names of the three children to which Hosea's unfaithful wife gave birth and with the prophetic significance to those names. The first child was a son called Jezreel, a name meaning "God Plants"; the second child was a daughter named Lo-ruhamah, "Not Pitied." As for the name of the third child, this time a son again, he was called Lo-ammi, a name that means "Not My People." When that son receives his name the climax of the first

4. Cf., e.g., W. H. Brownlee, *The Meaning of the Qumran Scrolls for the Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), pp. 288-291.

5. Cf., e.g., E. Jacob, *Theology of the Old Testament* (tr. A. W. Heathcote and P. J. Allcock) (New York: Harper, 1958), pp. 48-54, 273. On the whole subject see now especially R. de Vaux, "The Revelation of the Divine Name YHWH," in J. I. Durham and J. R. Porter, eds., *Proclamation and Presence* (Richmond: Knox, 1970), pp. 48-75.

6. S. Mandelkern, *Veteris Testamenti concordantiae hebraicae atque chaldaicae*⁵ (Jerusalem and Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1962), p. 316. For the occurrence of *Ehyeh* in theophoric names among the Nabataeans cf. A. Alt, *Essays on Old Testament History and Religion* (tr. R. A. Wilson) (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, Anchor paperback, 1968), p. 9, fn. 10.

chapter is reached, and the language of Hosea 1:9 is solemn indeed. God is the unexpressed subject, and the verse reads literally as follows: "And he said, 'Call his name Lo-ammi, because you are not my people, and I am Lo-ehyeh to you.'" *Lo*' is the ordinary Hebrew word for "not," and *ehyeh* means "I am," so Lo-ehyeh means "Not I Am." Because the people of Israel in the days of Hosea were in such a sinful condition, the Lord tells them that they are no longer His people and that He is no longer their I AM: "I am 'Not-I-AM' to you."⁷

But if it be true that *ehyeh* is clearly the divine name, "I AM," only five of the 36 times that it appears with God as its subject, it is also true that the *idea* behind the divine name is never very far away in many if not most of the other 31 occurrences. Over and over again the Lord says, "I will be (*ehyeh*) with," or "I will be (*ehyeh*) the father of," Isaac and Jacob, Moses and Joshua, David and Solomon.⁸ Over and over again the Lord says, "I will be (*ehyeh*) the God of" Judah, "I will be (*ehyeh*) as the dew to" Israel, "I will be (*ehyeh*) the glory within" Jerusalem.⁹ Such statements, even if they are not clear references to the divine name, I AM, at the very least hint at the significance of that name. "I am," when used by God, is not merely a declaration of existence (although, of course, it may include such a declaration); "I am," when used by God, is in every case an affirmation of relationship. Negatively, this is what makes the Lo-ehyeh, the "Not-I-AM," of Hosea 1:9 such a terrifying name: it signalizes the rupture of the relationship between God and His people. But positively, this is also what makes the Ehyeh, the "I AM," of Exodus 3:14 such an encouraging revelation of God's nature: it signalizes the renewal of the fellowship between God and His people.

The I AM of God, then, is worlds apart from the "I am" of, for example, Popeye the sailor man. In my boyhood days Popeye, the cartoon character, used to say, "I'm Popeye the sailor man, I'm Popeye the sailor man; I am what I am, and that's all I am, I'm Popeye the sailor man." Popeye was simply declaring his existence and warning the inquisitive to keep their distance. Some would assert that God was doing precisely the same thing when He said to Moses in Exodus 3:14, "I AM WHO I AM." However that may be, such an idea is surely incidental to the main thrust of God's statement, especially in the light of what the verb *ehyeh* implies elsewhere in the Old Testament. One modern writer tends to understand the "I AM WHO I AM" of Exodus 3:14 to mean, "I will be present (in a dynamic, active sense) wherever, whenever, and to

7. Cf., independently, P. R. Ackroyd, *Exile and Restoration* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1968), p. 134, fn. 73; M. Buber, *Moses* (New York: Harper Torchbook, 1958), pp. 53 f.; M. Noth, *Exodus* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1962), p. 44; J. Plastaras, *The God of Exodus* (Milwaukee: Bruce, 1966), pp. 97 f.; R. de Vaux in Durham and Porter, *op. cit.*, pp. 73 f.

8. Genesis 26:3; 31:3; Exodus 3:12; Deuteronomy 31:23; Joshua 1:5; 3:7; 2 Samuel 7:9, 14; 1 Chronicles 17:8, 13; 28:6.

9. Jeremiah 11:4; 24:7; 30:22; 31:1; 32:38; Ezekiel 11:20; 14:11; 34:24; 36:28; 37:23; Hosea 14:6 (Eng. 14:5); Zechariah 2:9 (Eng. 2:5); 8:8.

whomever I will be present."¹⁰ When God says, "I AM WHO I AM," He refers less to His mere existence than to His gracious presence.

Ancient Jewish commentaries on Exodus 3:14 expounded the divine I AM in a way that stressed the supratemporality or eternity of God. They did so in terms of a triple formula, "I am who I have been, who I now am, and who I will be in the future," as well as in terms of a double formula, "I am who I was and will be."¹¹ Such formulae underplay the dynamic presence, the active relationship that characterizes the divine name. It is just possible that they do so under the influence of such interpretations as that of the Septuagint which translated the (I AM WHO) I AM of Exodus 3:14 as "(I am) the one who is." The double formula of Jewish tradition has its parallel in Revelation 11:17; 16:5 where God is described as "the one who is and who was." But the triple formula of the Book of Revelation, although formally parallel to the triple formula of Jewish tradition, restores to the divine name its active dynamism in describing God as "the one who was and who is and who is *coming*" (4:8; cf. also 1:4, 8; italics mine). And it is to the credit of at least some of our present-day theologians of hope that they are stressing the inevitable future activism of the God who says, "I will be who I will be."¹²

The transition from the Old Testament "I AM" of Yahweh to the New Testament "I am" of Jesus Christ is not far to seek.¹³ I could make that transition much more smoothly and decisively if I were to use only the independent personal pronoun, "I," in the words of Jesus as my point of departure (the same three basic ways in which to say "I am" in Hebrew apply to New Testament Greek as well). But in order to maintain the verbal parallel between the two Testaments I shall confine my remarks to the Greek verb that corresponds roughly to the English "am," with or without the independent pronoun "I." I shall further confine myself by referring only to what I consider the more important occurrences of that verb as used by Jesus in the Gospels and as pertinent to our topic.

As a sequel to the well-known account of Jesus' feeding of the five thousand, Matthew, Mark and John tell the equally well-known story of Jesus' walking on the water. The three Evangelists agree that Jesus' minimal response to the terror-stricken disciples in the boat when they saw Him approaching them was, "I am; do not be afraid" (Matt. 14:27; Mark 6:50; John 6:20). Although His main purpose in so speaking was doubtless to identify Himself to them as their trusted friend and thereby calm their fears, they could scarcely have heard those words, "I am,"

10. Plastaras, *op. cit.*, p. 98.

11. See especially F. Buchsel in *TDNT* II, pp. 398 f.

12. Cf. J. B. Metz in M. E. Marty and D. G. Peerman, eds., *New Theology* No. 5 (New York: Macmillan, 1968), p. 134.

13. Cf. F. F. B(ruce) and W. J. M(artin), *The Deity of Christ* (Manchester, England: North of England Evangelical Trust, 1964), pp. 7 f.

in that awe-inspiring context, without discerning in them a somewhat deeper significance.

What may or may not have been implicit in the "I am" of Jesus on that occasion became explicit at the time of His trial before the religious authorities of Jerusalem. Luke's account recalls the inquisition of the elders as they demanded certain information from Jesus, information that He refused to give them. When they finally asked Him if He was the Son of God, He said to them, "You say that I am." The phrase "I am" was all they needed to hear; their response to it indicates that they were thoroughly convinced that by using it He was claiming divine prerogatives (Luke 22:66-71).

In Mark's account of Jesus' trial, our Lord is even more direct. Here He does not put the "I am" into the mouths of His accusers, but uses the expression of Himself. To the high priest's question, "Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed?" Jesus responds, simply and forthrightly, "I am." At that "the high priest tore his mantle, and said, 'Why do we still need witnesses? You have heard his blasphemy'" (Mark 16:61-64). Quite clearly, the inquisitors of Jesus heard in His "I am" unnerving echoes of the ancient *ehyeh*.

That the unqualified phrase "I am" had messianic overtones in the understanding of Mark may be demonstrated by examining Mark's record of the Olivet discourse. In describing the coming period of severe tribulation, Jesus warns four of His disciples concerning those days, "If any one says to you, 'Look, here is the Messiah!' or 'Look, there he is!' do not believe it. False messiahs and false prophets will arise and show signs and wonders, to lead astray, if possible, the elect. But take heed; I have told you all things beforehand" (Mark 13:21-23). Earlier in the chapter Jesus had said to them, "Take heed that no one leads you astray. Many will come in my name, saying, 'I am!' and they will lead many astray" (13:5 f.). A comparison of these two passages indicates that "I am" was a statement of messianic self-disclosure that had the potential of being misappropriated by pretenders (cf. also Luke 21:8). Matthew's account of the same incident is even more pointed: "Jesus answered them, 'Take heed that no one leads you astray. For many will come in my name, saying, 'I am the Messiah,' and they will lead many astray'" (Matt. 24:4 f.). Although Matthew's "I am the Messiah" is clear and unambiguous, the unadorned "I am" of Mark and Luke prepare us better to understand the meaning of that formula in the Gospel of John as it is found there on the lips of Jesus.¹⁴

14. Due to space limitations I shall not develop the implications of Johannine references to sayings of Jesus that include a predicate nominative expression after "I am," such as, e.g., "I am the bread of life" (John 6:35; cf. 6:51), etc. For an admirable treatment of this aspect of our topic, as well as for other pertinent observations, cf. especially R. E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John (I-XII)* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1966), pp. 533-538. While not entirely excluding the influence of the "I AM" in Exodus 3:14 on Johannine usage, P. B. Harner, *The "I Am" of the Fourth Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, Facet paperback, 1970), suggests that closer Old Testament parallels may be found in the "I am He" phraseology of Isaiah 40-55.

It is fascinating indeed to watch the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well as the light of recognition dawns, develops, and finally shines brightly. First addressing Jesus simply as "a Jew" (John 4:9), she soon calls Him "Sir" (4:11, 15) and then, as the conversation deepens, adds to that word the term "prophet" (4:19). To her last statement to Him, "I know that Messiah is coming (he who is called Christ); when he comes, he will show us all things" (4:25), Jesus responds with His final word to her: "I am, I who speak to you" (4:26). That bothersome "I am," together with everything that led up to it, perhaps set the woman to thinking, because she later began to wonder aloud whether Jesus could in fact be the Messiah (4:29).

The importance in John of the "I am" formula as a declaration of messianic self-authentication on the part of a living Christ who was about to defeat death in its own territory and on its own terms can be seen in a small group of texts in that Gospel. To a company of Jews, presumably Pharisees (8:13), Jesus said, "I told you that you would die in your sins, for you will die in your sins unless you believe that I am" (8:24). Death can be avoided only by believing in Jesus' messianic claims. In the same context our Lord also said to them, "When you have lifted up the Son of man, then you will know that I am" (8:28). Calvary would be followed by resurrection and ascension, the crucified dead Messiah would become the exalted living Lord, and the one who had said, "I am," would prove that death could not keep its prey. But before Easter Sunday, indeed before His final Passover meal with His disciples, Jesus told them that He wanted to talk to them about His forthcoming betrayal and death "now, before it takes place, that when it does take place you may believe that I am" (13:19). His death would plunge His followers into despair, but the events following immediately upon His death would demonstrate to them the living dynamism that forms the very heart and soul of the words, "I am," when pronounced by the proper Person.

Those same words, when spoken by Jesus, call forth two mutually exclusive responses from people today, just as they did in the days of John. At the conclusion of a discussion with a group of Jews who had just attributed demon possession to Him, "Jesus said to them, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was born, I am.'" (8:58). When those proud countrymen of His heard that divine name, I AM, and as soon as they realized the full implications of what Jesus was saying to them, preparing to stone Him to death was the only reaction of which they were capable. Much later, a band of soldiers made their way to the Garden of Gethsemane in order to arrest Him. Jesus "came forward and said to them, 'Whom do you seek?' They answered him, 'Jesus of Nazareth.' Jesus said to them, 'I am.'" (18:4 f.). When those jittery soldiers heard that divine name, I AM, and as soon as they realized the

full implications of what Jesus was saying to them, "they drew back and fell to the ground" (18:6).¹⁵

And so it is today. Whenever Jesus says to us afresh, "I am," whenever He confronts us as He who is one with God and the way to God, we can either reach for a rock or fall at His feet. The Christian, of course, does not hesitate in the face of such a choice. For him, to have stated the options is to have already selected the only appropriate one.

15. Cf. P. R. Ackroyd, *The First Book of Samuel* (Cambridge, England: The University Press, 1971), p. 112; Brown, *op. cit.*, pp. 534, 537; Plastaras, *op. cit.*, p. 100; contrast E. Stauffer in *TDNT* II, p. 352.