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# OBSERVATIONS ON THE USE OF THE NAMES AND TITLES OF GOD IN GENESIS

## And the Bearing of Exodus 6: 3 on the Same

by F. G. SMITH

**M**R. SMITH, an alumnus of Camden College, Sydney, and a missionary of the London Missionary Society, prepared the following paper some years ago in Madagascar. We agree with his understanding of Exodus 6: 3, although some notice might have been taken of the rendering preferred among others by Dr. W. J. Martin: "and by my name YHWH did I not let myself be known to them?" As for Genesis 4: 26, it appears to mean that the name YHWH was indeed invoked in primeval times, although not by the patriarchs.

**B**Y what name or title was God known to the patriarchs in the book of Genesis? In Exodus 6: 3 it is recorded that God said to Moses, "I am the LORD. I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, as God Almighty, but by my name the LORD I did not make myself known to them" (RSV).<sup>1</sup> By "the LORD" is meant YHWH, or as it is commonly spelt in English, Yahweh. Was this name Yahweh known to the patriarchs? I must say that if Exodus 6: 3 "means what it says" (as Spurgeon is supposed to have said on one occasion concerning another text), then the name YHWH was *not* known to the patriarchs. A plain unbiased reading of the text, unswayed by any critical or other kind of suppositions, must surely yield that meaning and no other. Read it again in the AV: "By my name JEHOVAH was I not known to them".

But a proper consideration of the meaning of this verse has been rendered difficult, if not well-nigh impossible, by the labours of the Higher Critics. Because they have split Genesis into several documents on the basis of the variations of the names for God therein, conservative scholars since have fallen over backwards in an effort to make Ex. 6: 3 mean that "by my name YHWH I *did* make myself known to them". Professor Oswald T. Allis, in some Bible Study Notes in *The Life of Faith* for October 24, 1963, says,

"By my name Jehovah I was not known to them" (6: 3). The best and simplest explanation of these words is the one indicated by the

<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are taken from the RSV of the Bible.

words we have been considering, "and they shall know that I am Jehovah" (7: 17). That the name Jehovah was known and used long before the time of Moses is clearly indicated (Gen. 4: 26), but the full redemptive *significance* of the name was not revealed until the exodus.<sup>2</sup>

In the *New Bible Dictionary* in the article "God" it is clear that the issue is confused by the necessity of refuting the hypothesis which makes Ex. 6: 3 "a 'duplicate' by the Priestly writer (P) of the account in ch. 3". So the term "El Shaddai" (God Almighty) is reduced to a simple statement that "He, Yahweh, was such a God ('ēl) as was competent (*šadday*) to fulfil (the promise)", thus practically emptying of meaning the great term "El Shaddai". In the *New Bible Commentary* the comment on Ex. 6: 3 begins with the words, "Contrary to the statements of modern criticism, God is not here announcing to Moses a new name by which He is to be called".

In each of these cases Ex. 6: 3 is made to mean something different from what it actually says. These and other forced interpretations of a verse of Scripture of plain meaning are demanded first of all in an attempt to answer the higher critical contention that Genesis is a composite document, and secondly because no clear reason has been found on other grounds for the presence in Genesis of the divine name YHWH. But is this wresting of the plain meaning of Ex. 6: 3 the only way of dealing with the problem? Can the use of the divine name YHWH in Genesis be accounted for in such a way as to preserve the integrity of Scripture and without resort to the kind of special pleading referred to above?

A solution which is worth a careful study has been suggested by Air Commodore P. J. Wiseman in his book *New Discoveries in Babylonia about Genesis*. His thesis is that Genesis was compiled by the patriarchs themselves, and that the tablets on which they inscribed their family histories were among the archives carried out of Egypt by Moses. He goes on to say that when Moses translated these ancient records into Hebrew for the people of Israel he had to find a name for God which would be acceptable and understandable to them. He says that the Egyptians and Babylonians had scores of gods, "and each in his own territory was regarded as a 'god almighty', as the creator and preserver of all the world and mankind. The Egyptians seemed to see nothing illogical in these scores of gods, each being creator and ruler of the world" (p. 116). The term "Almighty God", having become degraded by Egyptian polytheistic usage, was no longer acceptable,

<sup>2</sup> Reprinted in *God Spoke by Moses* (1951), p. 65.

so Moses translated the term or terms in the original documents by the name YHWH.

Whether or not Wiseman's thesis can be accepted in its entirety, there is a good case for arguing that Genesis is a very ancient document. Whether it was in written or oral form at the time of Moses it would still be necessary to decide which divine name should be used in transcribing or translating the record for the benefit of the people of Israel.

The conclusion to which I have been drawn after a study of the use of the names and titles for God in Genesis and the early part of Exodus is that God was known to the patriarchs as "El Shaddai", God Almighty, and that that name or title was given to Abraham as a special revelation. It therefore must follow that the incidence of the name YHWH in Genesis is due to the hand of Moses the translator. While it is true that there may be some room for speculation as to how the name YHWH came to be in Genesis (should the agency of Moses, for example, be denied), there is nevertheless abundant evidence for the thesis that the title El Shaddai belongs to the patriarchs and the name YHWH to the Covenant people. It will be seen as we proceed that there is no occurrence of the name YHWH in Genesis upon which any theological considerations depend.

I think a distinction can be drawn between the simple *use* of a name for God in Scripture, and a *declaration* or revelation concerning the divine name or titles. But very grave difficulties concerning the nature of revelation are raised when we are told, as we have been told repeatedly, that the *name* YHWH was known to the patriarchs, but that it had for them no significance.

*YHWH, or YHWH Elohim in Genesis.* The name YHWH, either alone or in combination, occurs 162 times in Genesis. It does not occur at all in Gen. 1: 1-2: 4, and only once (49: 18) in Genesis 40-50. There must be some significance in the fact that the name YHWH does not occur at all in the story of Joseph from the time he has contact with the servants of Pharaoh in prison.

The name YHWH occurs 34 times in the mouths of the speakers in Genesis. In none of these occurrences does the speaker make any pronouncement or declaration concerning the nature of God. In each case where YHWH is used it would be perfectly possible to substitute another term for God without in any way affecting the sense of the passage. Some instances however require special mention.

Gen. 14: 22 "I have lifted up my hands to the LORD, the Most High God, the possessor of heaven and earth . . ." (AV).

Gen. 21: 33 "Abraham . . . called there on the name of the LORD,

the Everlasting God".

Gen. 24: 3 "Swear by the LORD, the God of heaven and of the earth".

Gen. 28: 16 "Surely the LORD is in this place". This must be read in the light of ch. 48: 3, where Jacob says, "God Almighty appeared to me at Luz".

The significant term in each case is the alternative rendering, "Most High God", "Everlasting God", and so on. We may then ask, how does the name YHWH come to be used here if it was not known to these speakers? The answer surely is that the sacred name is there for the benefit of succeeding generations of Israelites.<sup>3</sup>

"*Almighty*" and "*God Almighty*" in Scripture. P. J. Wiseman says:

There are some noteworthy facts regarding this word "Shaddai" to which sufficient attention has not been given. In the first place, the full composite title "El Shaddai" as stated in Ex. 6: 3 is not used elsewhere than in Genesis, and these uses are on important occasions. (See 17: 1; 28: 3; 35: 11; 43: 14 and 48: 3). The next impressive fact is that the word "Shaddai" alone is used 42 times, and in almost every instance by persons writing or living outside Palestine, and in contact with Babylonian cunieforn modes of expression (op. cit., p. 114).

The first use of El Shaddai in Scripture is in Gen. 17: 1, which is the occasion of one of the most important revelations made by God to Abraham. There are four other uses of the full title in Genesis. One, in Gen. 35: 11, is on the occasion when Jacob's name is changed to Israel: "I am God Almighty, be fruitful and multiply". Another is in Gen. 48: 3, where Jacob refers to God's appearance to him at Bethel (Luz) in ch. 28: 16.

The title "Shaddai" is used by Balaam (Num. 24: 4, 16), by Naomi, who has just come from the land of Moab (Ruth 1: 20, 21), by all the speakers in Job some 31 times, by Isaiah (13: 1, 6, "The burden of Babylon, . . . it shall come as a destruction from the Almighty"), and also in Psalms 68: 14 and 91: 1, and in Ezekiel 1: 24 and 10: 5, and in Joel 1: 15. It will be remembered that Ezekiel prophesied in Babylon.

*Revelations of God in Genesis.* The revelational or declaratory statements concerning God in Genesis are as follows:

Gen. 14: 19, 20 "Blessed be Abram by God Most High, maker of heaven and earth, and blessed be God Most High".

Gen. 14: 22 "I have sworn to the LORD God Most High, maker of heaven and earth".

Gen. 15: 1 "Fear not, Abram, I am your shield".

<sup>3</sup> Is it legitimate to suggest that there is a parallel in the use of the name "Christ", and the words "Gospel" and "Church" in the chapter and page headings in the O.T. of some editions of the AV?

Gen. 17: 1 "The LORD appeared to Abram, and said to him, I am God Almighty".

Gen. 21: 33 "And called there on the name of the LORD, the Everlasting God".

Gen. 22: 14 "So Abraham called the name of that place The LORD will provide".

Gen. 24: 3, 7 "I will make you swear by the LORD, the God of heaven and of the earth".

Gen. 28 3 "God Almighty bless you and make you fruitful".

Gen. 28: 16 "Surely the LORD is in this place". (This must be read in the light of Jacob's explanation in ch. 48: 3).

Gen. 31: 13 "I am the God of Bethel".

Gen. 31: 42 "If the God of my father, the God of Abraham and the Fear of Isaac, had not been on my side . . .".

Gen. 31: 53 "The God of Abraham and the God of Nahor, the God of their father, judge between us".

Gen. 35: 11 "I am God Almighty; be fruitful and multiply".

Gen. 43: 14 "May God Almighty grant you mercy before the man".

Gen. 46: 3 "I am God (El), the God of your father".

Gen. 49: 25 "By the God of your father who will help you, by God Almighty who will bless you".

In times of crisis, and in moments of high significance God revealed Himself to the patriarchs or was invoked by them. The titles which were used, which were full of meaning for the patriarchs, were "Most High God", "God of heaven", "Everlasting God", "God of (their) fathers", and, most important of all, "Almighty God" or "El Shaddai".

God has many titles, but only one name, LORD (YHWH). But YHWH is never used at all in any covenant dealings between God and the patriarchs. Considering the importance of this name in the subsequent dealings of God with His people, it seems peculiar that the name was known to the patriarchs but that its significance meant nothing to them.

Genesis 17 is the occasion of a new and important revelation to Abraham, even the promise of a son in his old age. In this son the promises were to be fulfilled, and this was to be significant, not only for Abraham, but for all succeeding generations. So important was the occasion that God changed Abram's name to Abraham. It was then that God first revealed Himself as El Shaddai, God Almighty. It was this God, the Almighty, who would fulfil His promise to give Abraham a son. It was an exalted title, but one in line with the knowledge Abram already had of God as the Most High God.

The book of Exodus begins with an important forward step in the history of revelation, even the calling out of the descendants of Abraham to be a people for God. On that momentous occasion

God revealed His true name to Moses, and from then on He was known as YHWH, their covenant God. Beginning with Ex. 6: 3 the name YHWH took on a significance which it never had earlier, for the simple reason that the name itself and the significant fact that it was the covenant name of God had never been disclosed to mankind before that occasion.

I think it may be agreed that the next and final great intervention of God in human affairs, and the occasion of an important new departure in His dealings with men was also the occasion of the revelation of the human name of His only Son. "You shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins" (Matt. 1: 21).

The pronouncements concerning the name of God in the early chapters of Exodus only serve to strengthen the argument set out above.

Ex. 3: 6 "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob".

Ex. 3: 13-15 "What is his name? What shall I say to them? God said to Moses, I AM WHO I AM. . . . I AM has sent me to you. . . . 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".

Ex. 6: 3 "I am the LORD. I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, as God Almighty, but by my name the LORD I did not make myself known to them".

From this point on the phrase "I am the LORD" begins to be used in Scripture. It is never used before Ex. 6: 3. But immediately afterwards we have the pronouncement, "I am the LORD, *and I will bring you out . . . I will deliver you . . . and I will redeem you . . . I am the LORD*" (Ex. 6: 6-8). At the same time the terms "Everlasting God", "Most High God", and "God of heaven" almost cease to be used by the covenant people of YHWH. These terms are almost always used in subsequent ages in a Gentile context or setting. "God of heaven" is used by Cyrus, in Ezra and Nehemiah, in Daniel and in Jonah. "Most High God" occurs a few times in the Psalms, in Daniel, in Micah 6: 6, and, significantly, in Mark 5: 7 and Acts 16: 17. These terms were rich in meaning for the patriarchs, but ceased to be used by their descendants from the Exodus onwards. Why? Surely because the people had now been given the covenant name YHWH. The time was not ripe earlier for the name YHWH to be revealed, for from Abraham came Ishmael and from Isaac came Esau. By the time of Moses however, the separate identity of the people of Israel had been established.

One or two questions still remain unanswered. Gen. 4: 26 says, "At that time men began to call upon the name of the LORD".

This verse is used by some as a proof-text that YHWH was known in patriarchal times. I am baffled by the verse as it stands, and can only suggest that men began to call upon God, the God of heaven, by the name or title by which they knew Him.

Another question concerns *Jochebed*, the mother of Moses, whose name is variously rendered as "Jah is honour" or "YHWH is glory". All that can be said in answer to this at the present stage is that the name Jochebed does not occur in the account of the birth of Moses in Ex. 2, its first occurrence being in ch. 6: 20. And in the second place there are no names found in Genesis which are compounded with YHWH, such as is common subsequently in Israel.

I must say that the idea here unfolded of Abraham in his wanderings lifting up his eyes to the "Almighty God" is one which opens one's eyes to the grandeur and majesty of God as revealed to Abraham. It is a conception which must surely have been very satisfying to Abraham, for it was the "Most High God, maker of heaven and earth" who would fulfil those promises to make his seed as many as the stars of the heaven for multitude. Abraham worshipped no mere family God; he worshipped the Almighty, the God of heaven and earth. It was a magnificent revelation—a fuller one was to come—but this was as much as Abraham could comprehend. At the same time the knowledge of God as the Almighty and as Most High was carried by Abraham's descendants to the surrounding nations, bearing witness to them of His eternal power and Godhead.

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